ゼロの使い魔
19
〈始祖の円鏡〉
ヤマグチノボル
MF文庫J

# Zero no Tsukaima - Volume 19
# — The Founder's Round Mirror

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するとタバサは軽く唇を噛んで頬を染め、横を向いた。
シエスタは「失礼します」と頭を下げると、
タバサの胸やあごの下などを両手で探り始めた。
「ミス・ヴァリエール」
「あによ」
シルフィードと額を押しつけ合っていたルイズは、
不機嫌なうなり声をあげた。

入ってきたのは、一人のエルフだった。
そして、何一つ身につけていなかった。
でもってこれが一番重要だが、エルフは若い女性だった。
吊り上がった切れ長の瞳に、無造作に切りそろえられた長い金髪。
ティファニアとルイズを、足して2で割ったような容姿だった。

ルイズとシエスタが呆然としていると、
シルフィードはぱっくりとルイズをくわえ、
自分の背中に乗せた。
「わたしも！　わたしも！」
シエスタが叫ぶと、
シルフィードはひょいっとくわえて、背中に乗せる。
そして、最後にタバサが乗ってきた。
ルイズはただただ呆然として、タバサを見つめた。
何か言おうと思ったが、うまく言葉にならない。
でも、気づいたら礼の言葉が口をついていた。
「ありがとう」

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# ゼロの使い魔 19
## 始祖の円鏡

ヤマグチノボル

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# Chapter 1 - Maidens of Des Ornières

The fourth day of the third week of Niido in Des Ornieres turned out to be very hot. Halkeginia's summer is rather dry than hot, so heat is usually not a problem, but every now and then there is a day like that.

There were no air conditioners in this world. Coolers based on water magic existed but they were rather expensive and unreliable. Continuous spell cast was difficult to control and losing control was dangerous. Magic was rarely used for air cooling.

This is why a big fan was installed on the ceiling of the mansion room. It was repaired during renovation. Magic rotated the blades creating a flow of air. It didn't help Louise much.

"Uuuu...," - Louise wiped sweat from her forehead. "I can't fall asleep."

This was the second or third day she couldn't get enough sleep. Louise stared in disgust at the rotating fan.

Heat wasn't the only problem. She looked to the left.

There, serenely sleeping, mouth ajar, lay a black-haired girl.

Siesta.

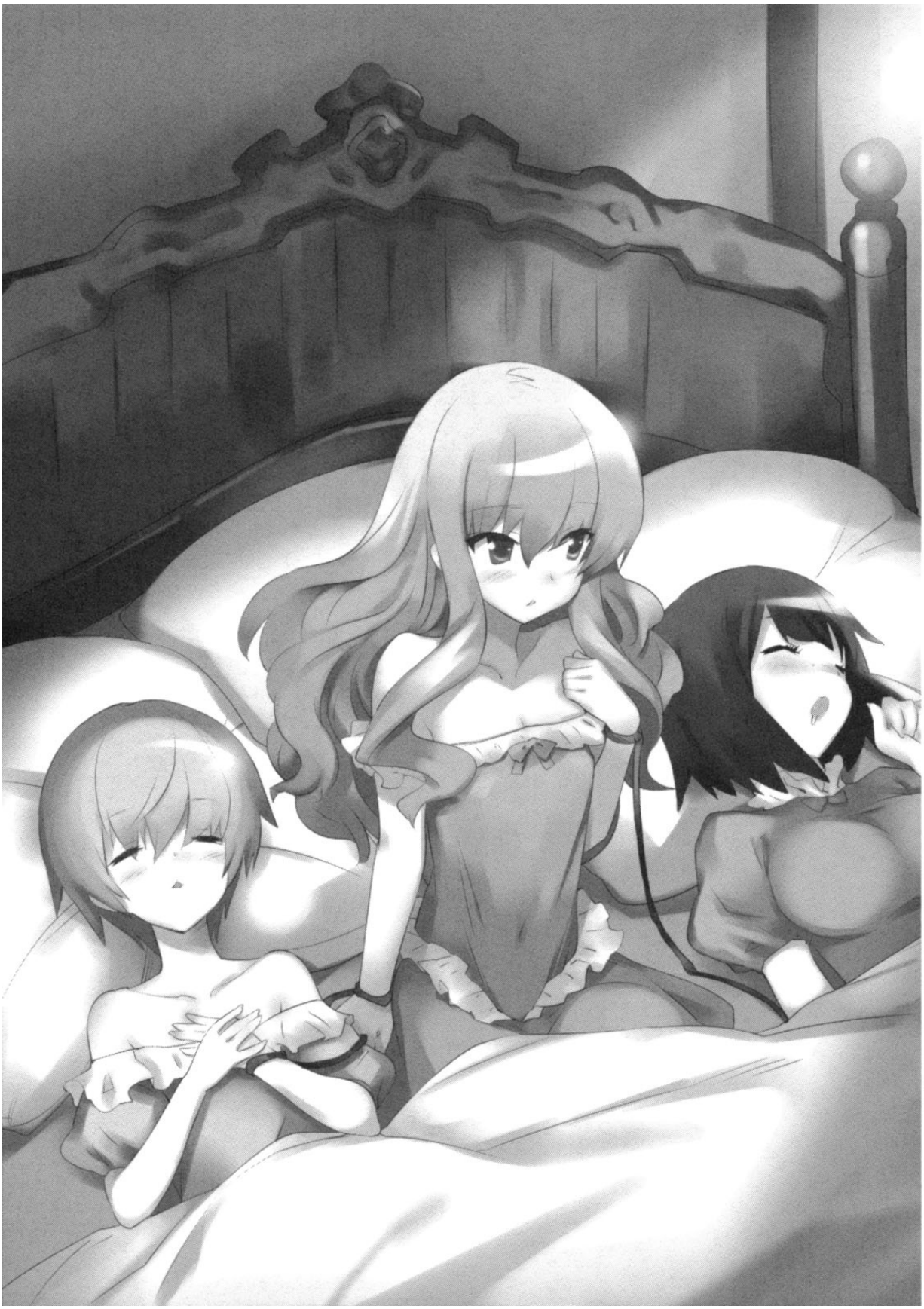
Napping was her favorite pastime. She was a genius at falling asleep. If there ever was a Falling Asleep Championship she would win hands down.

*Ah, it's impossible. The pillow is humid and hot and it only gets better when someone breathes on your nape. Just perfect.*

A rope connected the wrists of Louise and Siesta. It was like a painter that keeps a ship at a pier. Untie it and Siesta, little unfaithful boat, will start her travel to port Saito sleeping in the other room.

*And it wouldn't be good for anyone. It would only lead to unnecessary violence. No one wants that, right?*

Louise looked at the rope to check that it was well tied, then turned to the right where a blue-haired girl slept peacefully with hands folded on her chest.



Tabitha.

She also was falling asleep easily. Naturally for her, who had seen much harsher days, the mansion felt like heaven.

Her hand, just like Siesta's, was also tied to Louise. Although Tabitha shouldn't be able to untie it herself she had a very capable familiar, so Louise should still be vigilant.

Louise looked at the ceiling with a deep sigh. *I wonder how it's going to be.* She shook her head.

*When windstones in the depths of Halkeginia reach critical mass and raise it into the air.*

*Ah, maybe then I will be able to sleep...*

*I wonder if all the land will fly?*

Louise imagined islands floating in the sky like Albion.

One of them... A small island, with just herself and Saito on it. Just a hundred mails across, with a mansion and a small pond...

The maid sleeping on the left couldn't sneak in anymore. Hehe. She could only look at them from below! Then Louise felt ashamed of herself.

She shouldn't waste time on such silly dreams.

The place where she lives is about to disappear, how strange is that?

A wave of anxiety hit Louise. When it passed, she wanted to go to Saito. Every passing moment brought closer the cataclysm that could carry her away.

Eleonore, her elder sister, forbade Louise to sleep in the same bed with Saito until marriage. This was the main reason for her insomnia.

Before that she had not had any problems falling asleep. Initially there wasn't anything special in sleeping in the same bed with her familiar. At some point, unnoticed by her, it had become a necessity.

"Eleonore is unfair. I can't fall asleep and neither can he. Sleep deprivation is unhealthy."

She whispered her complaint about her sister sleeping in the next room. Suddenly she opened her eyes.

*Impossible. I can't sleep. It's too hot and Saito is not here.*

*How can I fall asleep?* Louise blushed lightly.

*A kiss. Right. A gentle one. A light touch. Three hours had passed, three hours. The sleep tight charm is faded.*

*Ok then.*

*Just a little sneak, about five minutes. He is a moron, so if I say "meow", he will be extremely gentle to me. Hmm, which is it - extreme or gentle... Whatever, both are fine.*

Louise thought about the extreme variant and blushed furiously.

"I can't. Eleonore would kill me. She would never allow it."

*Anyway, God and sister have to forgive what will happen in the next five minutes,* Louise thought while untying the rope. Then the door opened and a cheerful voice rang in the room.

"Yes! Hi! Kyuikyui!"

It was Sylphid. Her long hair had the same blue color as her master's. Sylphid briskly started to chew on the rope tying Tabitha to Louise.

"What are you doing?" - asked Louise.

"Decided. Taking big sister."

"Where?"

"Your familiar's room."

Louise tried to stand up but was pulled back by the rope and fell on the bed with

a yelp. The rope was still intact; Sylphid couldn't bite through it.

"Kyui! Durable rope! Pink Runt!"

"What did you call me?"

"Hair pink, and tiny."

Louise forgot about the rope. Sylphid tried to bite through the rope again when her teeth lost contact. Bam! - a blow came.

"Why?"

"A beast can't barge into a noble's room whenever it likes".

"Arrogant human. Rhyme Dragons are an ancient and powerful race. History and culture different from yours."

"Huge difference! You are trying to bite through the rope with your teeth! Stop it!"

Louise pulled the rope and Tabitha and Siesta woke up.

"...what?"

"What is going on?"

Sylphid hugged Tabitha, happily cooing "kyui".

"Ah! Sister awake at last! So good. Sylphy release sister, carry where sister want. Climb."

"What are you talking about? What about our agreement? One day turns?"

Siesta approached Louise.

"Just a dumb dragon trying to take an unnecessary initiative."

"Not unnecessary. Just following master's feelings!"

"Stop talking and get out. Dragons sleep outside."

Louise and Sylphid glared at each other.

Siesta asked Tabitha "So, does the stupid dragon speak for miss Tabitha?"

Tabitha paled, bit a lip lightly and looked away.

Siesta said "excuse me", lowered her head, and started exploring Tabitha's chest with both hands.

"Miss Valliere."

"Grrrr."

Sylphid and Louise were pressing each others foreheads with sullen growls.

"No, it's miss Tabitha."

"Grrrr."

"Obviously we are in estrus."

Tabitha reached for the cane with her free right hand and cast a silencing spell on Siesta. Ignoring Siesta's attempt to make signs she bashed the head of the dumb dragon.

Louise, with a red face, nodded to Tabitha and muttered a few words in her ear. Tabitha looked at her with wide opened eyes. Louise nodded to her again and said a few more words. Cold sweat covered the forehead of the trembling in fear Tabitha. Her mouth opened.

"You know what, I will go to Saito's room in the middle of the night and pretend to be you. It's wrong, but he is a good guy. Things can only happen if he is tricked. What do you think?"

Tabitha stiffened. Louise's spell was too strong of a stimulus for the innocent Tabitha.

"Ah, sister grew enough to lay eggs. Do your best!"

Sylphid, as if nothing happened, continued to gnaw on the rope. Then she forgot about the rope and tried to grab Tabitha's book.

When the chaos had calmed down a little, the room door burst open. A beautiful woman with long blond hair stormed into the room.

"Miss Eleonore!" - shrieked Louise.

Dressed in a negligee Eleonore, angrily fumbling with her glasses, yelled "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Louise straightened up and said with trembling voice.

"Oh, were we noisy?"

Enraged, Eleonore came closer and hit Sylphid.

"Why?"

"Sit."

Under Eleonore's intimidating gaze, Sylphid become quiet.

"Why would you start this party in the middle of the night?"

"We didn't", mumbled Louise, but Eleonore didn't hear her.

"I heard the word 'estrus'. What was that?"

"It's... it's just that this maid is really noisy."

Siesta felt that she should say something and looked at Tabitha, who quietly cancelled the silencing spell.

"Nonsense. No way. Miss Valliere is horrible. Didn't you mean to complain about miss Tabitha?"

Tabitha silently hit Siesta.

"Anyway, you don't seem to realize your responsibility as noble ladies."

"You know better miss Eleonore, but I am just a maid here."

"Quiet dames."

"Sylphy dragon."

"Silence!"

Eleonore frantically folded her arms and looked at the quiet Tabitha and sighed.

"Even though a member of the Gallian royal family is our guest, the responsibility for your education is on me. 'Mingle with the great to become great'; this is what I think as an elder daughter of the La Valliere family. Get ready, I will not go easy on you."

Slap! She fetched a riding whip and hit the bed with all her strength. Everyone yelped.

"Maid, dragon, royalty - as long as you live in this house you will behave as a lady or a servant according to the proper etiquette. I will teach all of you. Any questions?"

"No!" - everyone replied briskly.

The "lesson" lasted about two hours. Apparently its purpose was to entertain the awakened Eleonore. Mostly they were trained to walk properly under a relentless stream of Eleonore's homilies.

Louise was confident that her gait was appropriate for a noble, but on this night nothing was good enough for Eleonore. She had to repeat the "exercises" again and again.

First Siesta and Sylphid fell on the spot, defeated by sleepiness. Then Eleonore fell asleep on Louise's bed and Tabitha collapsed next to her.

It was just about an hour till dawn.

"What a preposterous night," - Louise said to herself when the noisy company

fell asleep. She sneaked out and went to Saito's room.

When she opened the door, Saito was sitting on a sofa.

"Are you awake?" - he said smiling.

"Yes. Can't sleep for some reason. You too?" Louise replied blushing, strangely embarrassed. Saito seemed to be lost in thought until now; his face had been serious and absent. It was like he had instantly become two or three years senior... one year at least.

It was already mentioned that a year in Saito's world was a little shorter than a year of this world, but the length of a day seemed to be about the same. Their worlds were not all that different.

It meant that Saito was about the same age as her, yet just moment ago he seemed to be an adult. It was unusual. She had always considered contemporary boys to be just kids, always spouting some nonsense. Boorish and rude creatures. Until she met Saito she wasn't much interested in love, and not so long ago he was just one of those creatures.

But he had matured very fast.

*I wonder why?* she thought. *A lot has happened recently. But one crisis he faced was obviously the greatest. He left his world. Did it change him?*

"What is it? Did you want to discuss something?" - said Saito to the silently watching Louise.

"What? Ah, no. Nothing special..."

Then he calmly said. "Ah, you just wanted to see me?"

Not so long ago Louise would have gotten angry and responded "No I didn't!".

But not now. Embarrassing.

"I also wanted to see you. I can't sleep. It's so hot and sleeping separately is strange. Unusual I mean."

Louise sat next to Saito and gently snuggled up to him. It was a new habit. She took his hand. Saito took the hint and lifted her chin. Louise closed her eyes. Their lips met and a sense of security filled Louise. After a while she asked, "What were you thinking about?"

"Well, the Crusade," Saito said flatly.

"Not convinced?" - she asked with concern. Indeed, she didn't want to fight the Elves herself. If negotiations fail, she will...

It's inevitable. Otherwise half of the people in Halkeginia will have nowhere to live. And for the other half life will change completely.

"No, I understand the Pope's position. People will have no place to live. It doesn't get more serious than that. But elves are such strong opponents."

"Well," - Louise also become serious.

"We don't have much to bargain with in negotiations. Usual magic is ineffective against them."

Louise knew it. But if the Four of Four worked together they would be able to use much more powerful magic.

Louise thought about the words written in Brimir's Founder's Prayer Book: "read when necessary."

"Maybe we will be able to use Void magic when we need it. This is how it worked before."

"Right..." - said Saito with concern.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"What is it?"

"Tiffania. I mean, her mother was an elf. It might be hard for her to fight against her mother's people."

Louise was startled. Indeed, for them, elves were bitter enemies. They definitely didn't want to fight them, but if it had to be done there wouldn't be much objection. But Tiffania was different.

And they couldn't do it without her.

Saito stood up, took a letter from a table and showed it to Louise.

"A letter from Tiffania."

"A letter?"

"Oh, an owl brought it."

Louise read the letter. According to it Tiffa was going to Des Ornieres at the Pope's request.

"I will arrive tomorrow... What? She is going to summon a familiar!" - said a surprised Louise.

"It's not completely unexpected. The Pope gathers the Four of Four together to use the full Void potential."

"Right, but..." said a worried Louise. The Crusade wasn't something new, but now it had become real for her.

Gathering of the Tristain invasion army had started again. Judging by previous campaigns' invasions, it was unlikely to go smoothly.

Nothing unusual, but this time she was directly involved. Louise was nervous. The future of the entirety of Halkeginia, beyond any doubt, depended on tiny and unreliable her.

She didn't know what to say. Saito noticed her nervousness and tried to reassure her.

"Indeed, elves are good negotiators. They probably will return Brimir's magic device. They don't need it."

Louise was ashamed. She didn't expect this responsibility and she was afraid of

it.

Anyway, the Pope had a plan of some sort, but it didn't inspire any optimism. Saito was different, he wouldn't expect something impossible of her.

"It belongs to them."

It was indisputable.

"I will study elves," - Louise said. In any case it's good to know your adversary. She noticed Saito's sadness.

"You don't want to fight?"

Saito shook his head.

"It's inevitable. Well, I hate it, but it's just how it is; there is nothing to like or dislike. First we will properly explain our problem to the Elves. If they reply 'whatever, tough luck'" - he squinted his eyes - "I will fight. For myself and my friends. There is no doubt about it."

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"I mean, this is not your world. It doesn't concern you..."

Amazed, Saito said "Still on this topic, huh?"

"No. Well, just a little. But, really, thank you."

Louise put her cheek on Saito's chest. He gently stroked her hair for a while. "This is my place" thought Louise. Of course this wasn't something she would say aloud.

"I will fight too. To protect this place."

She finally fell asleep.

# Chapter 2 - Assault

Saito sighed. There was one problem that he couldn't discuss with Louise.

He looked at the innocent face of Louise sleeping on his lap.

*Will Void magic be sufficient to scare the Elves? If so, can this small body withstand it?*

This worried him the most. Spectacular Void spells rapidly consumed a mage's willpower. Even the "explosion" spell couldn't be cast without it. And even if it's just an "explosion", who knows how much willpower would be needed for a spell that would be strong enough to scare the Elves?

What it would require from a caster?

Even in mortal danger, Louise would use it. To protect her home...

*And if it happened, I wonder if I could say to her: 'Stop'...*

Saito didn't know that "sometimes Void can take part of the caster's life force" was written in Founder's Prayer Book. Still, intuition was telling him that it was dangerous.

And with Louise's dedication, no one could stop her casting such a spell.

It was one of the reasons he liked her, but...

He didn't want her to be in danger.

What can he do about it?

He thought about it a lot, but there was no answer.

Certainly it was just a potential, maybe even a theoretical, danger.

But...

Intuition warned Saito about danger. (Maybe because he was a familiar and a Gandálfr.)

Knowledge is power they say... but nothing he learned in school was relevant here.

At this moment a bright flash came from the window.

"Huh?"

Something strange had happened outside.

Clenching his teeth, Saito grabbed a katana. Runes on his left hand began to glow.

He opened the window and jumped down. As soon as he landed, magic attacks started from two sides. Ice Arrow and Fireball...

Saito had expected this and dodged the projectiles.

The Fireball landed nearby and exploded. Sparks flew like fireworks and smoke floated over the impact point. The Ice Arrow hit the wall, scattering plaster.

Saito crouched and turned to face the attackers.

He didn't know who was outside, friend or foe, nor where they were nor how many. The loud jump from the second floor was supposed to help find answers to these questions.

Judging by the magic power, they were serious adversaries.

Now it was time to do something about them.

Saito shouted into darkness.

"Hey! You! Elemental Siblings!"

After a long pause there was a reply.

"Yes! Good game!"

It was Bleu's voice. Saito sighed.

"Come out for now. We need to discuss something."

A boy came out of the bushes in front of him, and a girl from the right side. She was with Bleu before. Her name, he thought, was Jeanette.

Last, the huge figure of the guy he fought in Gallia appeared.

"You..."

"Hi."

The giant cheerfully smiled. It was strange. This guy, Jack, was caught after the fight in Gallia.

"Hey, didn't we catch you?"

"There is no prison in the world that could hold me."

Jack laughed heartily. He probably was right. The Siblings were powerful mages, and on top of that their physical performance was also improved by some magic. Keeping them in a normal prison would be difficult.

"Let's go! Fair play! Get ready!" - Bleu screamed with a red face.

Saito scratched his head.

"Not interested."

"Really? Then you're just gonna die."

Bleu tried to cast a spell.

"Hey now... You destroyed Derflinger so I really want to fight you. However, it is impossible because Halkeginia is in grave danger right now."

"The rise of the continents, right?" Jeanette said in a bored tone.

"Do you know that it's not just the Fire Dragon Mountains? It will happen here, too."

"So what! It doesn't concern me!"

"It concerns me! Bleu, it's over. The Nobles of this country spend their money on troops now, so they cancelled the job. You are working for free."

"So, it was nobles."

Saito said sadly. He was angry. He shouldn't help this bunch to fight with the Elves.

"Don't talk about the clients!" said Bleu angrily.

"Oh? They are not clients anymore, so it doesn't matter."

Saito tired of this bickering.

"Anyway, go find some safe place. I don't really have time to mess with you. There is a lot to be done."

Bleu balked.

"Game is not over yet! Draw your sword!"

Saito felt a surge of anger. This guy killed Derf... He wanted to run to him and stab the sword through his chest.

But the other siblings would certainly get involved, and no doubt, everyone in the mansion would come to help.

It would be a big fight.

Big, but pointless.

"Hey, stop it. Your siblings don't see a reason to continue."

Saito pointed to the bitter Jack and Jeanette.

"Well," - said Jack, scratching his head.

"We should look for a place to escape."

"Hmm... It's supposed to happen everywhere. And whatever happens, I am sure we will survive."

That most likely was correct. Maybe most nobles thought so? That whatever happens they will be fine? Actually, everyone thinks like that; yet just his popularity surge almost killed him. The Nobles will be fine, but what will happen to the commoners working in the fields? There are a lot more of them than nobles.

"It was fine for six thousand years. It can't be that bad. Are you slow or something?"

"What do you mean?"

"Spelling it out. Good grief, he is just obsessing about winning this stupid game."

"Stupid? To become the strongest mage in the world? This dream is stupid!?"

Bleu took out his wand and turned to Saito.

"Is it?"

Well, words didn't work. Saito raised his katana.

Bleu waved his wand, which turned into a shining blade of powerful magic again.

Saito dodged.

Bleu made a lightning-fast lunge targeting Saito's chest. The siblings' physique was enhanced with Ancient Magic.

However, this time Saito moved much faster.

He jumped back, evading the hit and looked at Jeanette and Jack. They just watched.

But if Bleu was in trouble they would probably intervene. In other words, Saito couldn't win.

He was surprised that he could make such a calm observation.

In other words...

*He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.*

Saito turned and ran away.

"Mate!" yelled a surprised Bleu. There was no point in responding. Saito ran away from the mansion and into the forest.

Bleu was about to start chasing him, but a blue shadow blocked his way.

"W...who are you?"

It was Tabitha, menacingly holding her cane. She had noticed the commotion first, and literally flew here.

Still in a negligee, eyes sparkling with fury, she cast spells quickly.

"Windy Icicles" flew toward Bleu as an embodiment of Tabitha's anger.

Apparently she was very angry; there were dozens of them.

The icicles were launched all at once so they were difficult to deflect. Bleu stopped most of them with his wand, but he hadn't expected this attack and a few arrows hit him.

"Damn!" - cried Bleu, falling.

Tabitha pointed her cane at him.

"You move, you die."

She said flatly. There was not a trace of fighting spirit in her voice, but the icy chill drifting from her whole body told Bleu that she was deadly serious. Although she looked like a child, her stance befitted a battlefield.

But Bleu wasn't a rookie either. He prepared to absorb the girl's attack and cast a spell. Lightning flew from the cane top with a blinding flash.

"Lightning" is a spell of a high level mage. It is difficult to use because it can hit anyone, even the caster himself. Usually mages use "Lightning Cloud" instead, creating a small cloud from a safe distance.

Bleu, however, easily deflected the lightning. He was a worthy opponent.

Although the top of Tabitha's cane protected her hands, the lightning discharge shifted to the right. She almost dropped the cane, but managed to put it into the left hand and kept control over the discharge. She cast another spell. Raging wind hit Bleu.

This fight lasted about one second. Ten-odd mails separated the opponents.

"Good grief... I told you it would be like this. This mansion is stuffed to the roof with mages. Stop it..."

Jeanette sighed and tried to cast a spell to help Bleu.

Kaboom!

Something in front of her exploded pushing hew back. Through a cloud of dust in the light of the moons she saw a pink-haired girl in a negligee, glaring back at her.

"Is it...Vanessa?"

"No. Louise. And you are the murderer hunting for Saito."

Jeanette grinned.

"Not now, just accompanying my brother."

"Still a murderer. Absolutely unforgivable" Louise declared confidently.

Jeanette let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Come on, you have to forgive me eventually."

"Shut up."

"Who is it? The one who kissed your best friend? This is Saito? You ran to the monastery because of him, but the minute he is a little nicer to you everything is forgiven. Oh dear."

Louise was shaking with fury.

"N-none of your business."

"Oh, it's mine all right. Because I was kind enough to lead you all the way to the monastery. And yet you so easily reconciled. Killjoy."

"Shut up."

"Such a generous girl."

Outraged, Louise cast a spell again.

Kaboom! It was another 'Explosion'.

Jeanette disappeared.

"Huh?" said the surprised Louise.

"Absolutely unforgivable. I like how adamant you've become."

"You!"

It was Jeanette. How did she escape the explosion? Her agility seemed inhuman. Someone grabbed Louise's hand and she panicked.

"You! Let go!"

"Listen. How good is this guy really? I like you a lot. Maybe..."

Jeanette licked Louise's cheek.

"I have a dreadful power!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Furious, Louise tried to hit Jeanette with her other hand but Jeanette grabbed it too. Her forte, a kick, wasn't fast enough either.

"Really, an amusing kid!"

Beaming, Jeanette hugged Louise.

"Get off me! Now!"

Amazed, Jack stared at a sudden reinforcement. He noticed Saito coming to help Louise.

"Forest trees, seize my foe."

He recited a simple incantation with a very deep voice. Obeying Ancient Magic, tree branches moved tangling Saito's leg.

Saito was surprised for a moment by Tabitha's and Louise's appearance. Then he was deeply touched, almost moved to tears.

But the girls can't get involved. He was the target.

Tabitha was handling Bleu. But Louise... it seemed that Jeanette was holding both of her hands and she couldn't fight.

Louise is like a huge cannon which can obliterate anything on a battlefield, but is useless in close combat. Someone has to protect her, otherwise she can't fight.

"Coming!"

Shivering with anger, he bolted.

"Wow!"

Suddenly tree branches stretched out and entangled his leg.

Before crashing on the ground he noticed Jack's huge figure.

"You... Is this Ancient Magic? Why?"

"Oh, you don't like it? I have nothing against you, just helping my brother."

"Really pointless. Earth is going to be torn apart. We shouldn't fight!"

"How do you know?"

Saito kip-up and tried to reach Jack with the katana, but the giant moved fast and dodged.

"Hey, I'm not fighting you."

Jack held the cane in front of him to hold off Saito's attack. At this moment several fireballs exploded around him.

Then a tempting voice came from the darkness "Saito, are you ok?"

"Kirche!"

A snake of flame entangled Jack who was trying to cast a spell. Colbert controlled it with his wand.

"Mister Saito! Leave him to us!"

Saito rushed toward Louise.

Playful Jeanette cuddled the struggling Louise. She held both of Louise's hands and licked her cheek.

"Let me go!"

Louise tried to resist, but Jeanette barely noticed it. Saito ran to them.

"Louise! Are you ok?"

"Help! This girl is strange! Something is really wrong with her!"

Beaming, Jeanette looked alternately at Saito and Louise and licked her lips.

"She is too good for you. I will make her my doll."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Saito raised the katana. Jeanette smiled cheerfully.

"Oops. One more step..."

"Taking hostages is dastardly."

"I'm not gonna harm her, moron. I'll just rip this cute negligee off of her."

"You've got to be kidding!" replied Saito, and made a step forward.

Louise yelled: "Stop!"

"Huh? Why?"

Embarrassed Louise shook her head.

"I don't want others to see..."

Saito opened his mouth and blushed deeply.

"I see..."

Looking at them, Jeanette pouted.

"What? You guys."

Meanwhile, a fierce battle between Tabitha and Bleu continued. Bleu, despite the initial wounds from Windy Icicles, was on a roll. It looked like he didn't feel any pain. On the other hand Tabitha was known as number seven in the hierarchy of the Knights of the North Parterre.

Fighting against an opponent with greater power and speed wasn't a rare occasion. Although initially somewhat surprised by the inhuman speed of Bleu, now she was keeping up with him. After all, she really wanted to protect Saito.

This desire strengthened her wind spells a lot. She furiously attacked Bleu, looking for any gap to hit him with ice arrows. Every time they reached Bleu he used his hardening ability. Still, even with his inhuman speed, it was difficult to hit the flying on the wind Tabitha.

On the other hand, Tabitha didn't have much of an advantage. Her spells were not strong enough. Cast in quick succession, they lacked raw power and couldn't pierce Bleu's hardening. It was just like a perpetual check in the game of chess.

"Hmm. Goodness. What a mess."

A small shadow was watching the scuffle from a forest bush. It seemed to be a ten-to-twelve year old boy, but he wasn't a kid.

It was Damien, the eldest of the Elemental Siblings, and he was holding a strange object.

At first glance it looked like a huge brass instrument. The pipe was bent like a snail and ended with something like a trumpet bell.

Damien put this bell on the ground and pressed a switch replacing the usual pipe mouthpiece.

The pipe trembled with a low sound. Intense aura was flowing from it. The ground under the pipe began to glow slightly. The aura hit the ground and the transformation began.

"A device that constantly casts an alchemy spell. Amazing, really."

Sylphid ran to Tabitha who was exchanging spells with Bleu. Tabitha shook her head.

"I don't need help. This is dangerous, stay in the sky."

"Wrong. Bigger problem."

Sylphid said impatiently.

"Look there."

Why would she say it in the middle of the fight? Tabitha gave a quick glance as Sylphid suggested.

In moonlight below, Jeanette caught Louise and was about to roll up her negligee. Saito hesitated nearby.

Beaming, Jeanette seemed to be having fun.

This was anticlimactic. Completely different from her epic battle with Bleu, it looked like only they were fighting seriously.

"This enemy weak for sister!"

"Huh?"

"Often sister too strong! Look weak, get help! Like that child! Kyui!"

Tabitha was startled. Saito naturally ran to rescue Louise. Is she...too strong?

"And now you are looking around!"

Bleu yelled and swung his cane. The distracted Tabitha reacted slowly. Even though she dodged Bleu's blade, the wind that supported her was unbalanced.

"Help!"

Bleu tried to hit her with his magic blade, however, in the nick of time, Saito, warned by Sylphid's cry, rushed in and cut his wand in half.

"Ah!"

"Ah, see. Become visible. Look weak."

Apparently Saito while trying to help Louise was still paying some attention to his surroundings. When did he grow to be such a warrior?

Tabitha admired him for this.

"Damn! To lose to this guy again! Damn!"

Saito pointed the katana at Bleu stomping his feet in frustration and said "Well, who hired you to kill me?"

Anyway, he didn't want to be targeted by country nobles anymore. Expecting a hit in the back while dealing with the Elves would be too much.

"Damn! Damn! How? Why?"

Bleu didn't hear Saito. He was too distracted by his childish tantrum.

It looked like it was some Tristain nobles, sighed Saito. People he was going to help, among others. The nobility of this country was rather selfish.

The Princess is great though, he thought...

The ground violently shook.

"What is it! Earthquake!"

Could it be the continent rise? Saito's face paled.

Then he started to sink.

"Huh? What? Sinking? Is it ocean water? What is happening?"

Instantly they were in "water". Was there a flood of some kind? Did they teleport somewhere?

Anyway, it was rather deep. Can't reach the ground! Saito's hand touched something. It's a tree! From a grove near the mansion.

This means the ground changed into water somehow.

He grasped a tree branch and looked around. Everywhere, the water surface glittered in the moonlight. It looked like the Amazon forest in the middle of the rainy season that he seen on TV once.

Something strange... he felt a growing haze in his head. Huh? Why? Drowsy?

Dangerous. If he fell asleep he would certainly drown. Saito thrust the katana into the tree and tied his wrist to the pommel. Then he couldn't fight the drowsiness anymore.

# Chapter 3 - Abduction

"What is wrong with these goddamn barbarians? They think their land will be destroyed, yet they fight among themselves," said the monk with light brown hair and grey eyes.

His name was Madalf. He was thirty-seven years old, but humans wouldn't think him even twenty. Elves live about twice longer then humans.

Elves mature later, and therefore spend much more time learning. It is one of the reasons they consider humans barbarians.

"Rather shortsighted I suppose."

"Nothing new," - said Ali, commander of the group. He just wanted to quickly complete the mission and return to the desert. His body was slender and he looked nervous. It was difficult to guess that he was a veteran warrior.

He was forty years old, and likewise looked twice younger.

"Meaning?" - prompted Madalf.

"The current minor conflict is more important than a future catastrophe. They are just animals," Ali said with contempt in his voice.

His group of elves was watching the brawl from the bushes. Night darkness didn't present any problem for them. They used goggles enchanted with Ancient Magic to sense body temperature.

It was common knowledge that elves could see in the dark. Quite a few such misconceptions existed, largely thanks to excellent magic equipment.

"That Sainton guy, which one is it?" Ali asked Madalf.

Bidashal, the uncle of his fiancee, had asked him to look for an unusual boy.

At the moment Saito was about to help Louise, who was caught by Jeanette.

"This one. With the sword. Savage mages don't use weapons."

"So, what's the plan?"

It wasn't a good idea to fight everyone here. Apparently, a few of the humans were quite powerful.

Ali didn't respond. Luctiana, sitting nearby, said earnestly: "Hey Ali."

"Don't"

"I didn't even say anything yet!" said Luctiana, looking at him with her light blue eyes. Her beautiful face was tinted with anger. Anger didn't change the expression of her face, but it still was very obvious. After all, her frankness was one of the reasons Ali fell for her.

"Anyway, I suppose you want to look around?"

Luctiana stuck out her tongue.

"Again, barbarian's gestures! Stop it already!"

"I mean, such an opportunity doesn't happen often."

"Uh, it would be pointless. Not a good time, and there could be other mages around."

Excited, Luctiana said, "Then I will go explore around a little. Patrol around I mean."

"Wait a minute!"

"Awesome."

It was pointless to argue with Luctiana further. Ali gave up.

"In case of any danger, escape immediately. Idris, follow."

Idris nodded. He was a serious looking young elf with a round face and narrow eyes.

"What? I don't need escort. I am just fine by myself."

"Idris is not an escort. He is a patrol."

Idris smiled sarcastically.

"Got it, commander. I will take care of your fiancee. Thank you."

Angry, Luctiana, accompanied by Idris, disappeared into the darkness. Madalf frowned.

"Is it ok?" - he asked.

"She would go anyway. Stubborn." Ali said, embarrassed.

At this moment something strange happened in the area of the brawl. Earth instantly liquified, creating something like a pond. The fighters yelled in panic.

"What is it?" said the surprised Madalf.

Ali nonchalantly said "Barbarian magic I think. It seems that the earth is transmuted into 'water'."

"Strong, isn't it? It covers a large area."

"It seems they have a strong mage."

Ali began to cast a spell. Barbarians were confused by their own magic. He couldn't miss this opportunity.

"Water of life. Grant him peaceful sleep."

With a twitch of a finger, he released the spell. Water was a strong catalyst for it, so the spell reached Saito.

"Madalf, guard here."

"Got it."

Ali stood up, pulled up the hood and ran to the sleeping Saito. He entered the water, then swam.

Ali stared at the boy. The boy's right hand gripped a katana, piercing a tree. Ali's

magic had put him into a deep sleep.

The sleeping boy's face looked innocent.

This barbarian boy had defeated Bidashal... He is a familiar of a demon power which tormented Ali's ancestors.

Shield of the Void, Gandálfr.

He gulped involuntarily.

He noticed that his ears were twitching and bitterly smiled.

"Wow. I am afraid!"

He pulled on Saito's hand, but it was firmly grasping the katana. Ali tried to pull it out of the tree, however the sword stuck firmly. There was no time to waste, but he didn't want to use magic too often. He would have to borrow spirit force from spirits of the land.

An ice arrow flew toward his back. Ali had a wind shield powered by Ancient Magic. An invisible flow of air, like a tornado, enveloped his body.

The shield diverted the arrow and it missed.

He turned around. A little blue-haired girl waved her cane at him. A new arrow materialized.

The girl took into account the wind shield presence. An arrow entered the shield on the side, turned inside the flow, pierced it, and flew to Ali.

"Huh!"

Ali tilted his head to his shoulder. The arrow passed within a hair's breadth of his cheek and stuck in a tree behind him.

Well, this was too close. The arrow took off the hood and revealed his long elvish ears.

The blue-haired girl definitely noticed them.

Ali used a branch bow spell, turning tree branches into arrows.

This spell was his specialty. It was simple and hence easy to control, yet powerful. It was difficult to predict the trajectory of all the branches, therefore it was difficult to protect weak spots.

Tabitha immediately created a wind shield and diverted most of the branches, but the sudden appearance of an elf shook her. Several arrows flying from the back deeply pierced her body.

Tabitha started to sink but Sylphid caught her.

"Sister!"

"I am wounded. Hurry."

Ali used magic and managed to pull Saito's katana from the tree. Holding Saito, he quickly swam back using another Ancient Magic spell.

Louise heard the noise.

"What happened?"

"Huge problem! Elf! Took your familiar! Hurt sister!"

"Saito!?"

"Went there!"

Sylphid cooing kyuikyui pointed into darkness.

Colbert and Kirche took the unconscious Tabitha from the dragon.

"Louise, leave her to us. Go after Saito!" cried Kirche.

The Elemental Siblings disappeared when the earth turned into water.

Louise was confused.

What the hell just happened?

Elves? Here?

But that can wait.

Elves kidnapped Saito!

Obviously, enemies had tricked them.

"They will not escape."

Louise started the chase using the "teleport" spell.

Ali, carrying Saito, tried to climb out of the pond. It was difficult because the land at the waterfront was brittle.

"Good grief... Why is it so difficult?"

Madalf helped the mud-covered Ali pull Saito out of the water.

"You got in a fight." Madalf said, looking in the direction where Ali had come from.

"I couldn't help it. No plan is perfect."

Then Ali looked around.

"Where is Luctiana?"

"She hasn't returned yet."

"Really...really unruly girl."

"What's the plan?"

"For now, we return to the camp."

Ali had made a hidden base of operations in the forest. It was surrounded with a barrier of Ancient Magic.

With Saito on his shoulder he began to walk.

Something exploded behind Ali throwing him three mails forward. His wind shield protected him from magical and ordinary projectiles but was inefficient against the blast.

Ali's body heavily smashed into a tree, and he stood up frowning.

"Don't move!"

He slowly turned. A girl with pink hair was pointing her wand at him. There was no warning. Using some magic, she had instantly materialized right behind him.

The power of the magic aura emanating from this petite girl was terrifying.

"Release Saito."

She looked at the elf without a trace of fear. Intense anger was swirling in her auburn eyes. Ali instantly realized the connection between her and the boy he was carrying.

*Demon's follower.*

The girl was beautiful, even by Elven standards.

Her strength and beauty for some reason reminded Ali of Luctiana. First impression of a bitter enemy was far from what he could imagine.

However, despite her beautiful appearance, the demon's follower had caused a great disaster before using the terrible "Void" magic against his ancestors.

"One more time, release Saito and leave."

There was no point in killing a Demon's Follower; the power would be passed on to someone else.

But considering her ability, running was not an option either. Apparently she could catch up with them instantly.

Ali winked at Madalf.

"Carry him."

Madalf nodded and took Saito. Ali quickly cast "branch arrow".

Louise's "explosion" blew the arrows away.

Ali chosen a moment between explosions and kicked Louise. It wasn't a simple kick. The moment it reached Louise, lightning hit. Louise fainted and fell on the ground.

Ali was disappointed.

"She is a powerful mage, but not much of a fighter."

The girl seemed to be an amateur. She had lots of offensive power but couldn't use it in close combat. That was why she needed the familiar's protection. Elves were trained to use spirit force and yet received full warrior training. It looked like the barbarians had neglected the latter.

Ali came to this conclusion after this short fight.

There was also a difference in individual combat power.

"'Demon' is not all that scary, huh?" said Madalf laughing. He also realized the nature of Louise's power.

"Bidashal's decision to separate them was wise" Ali nodded and started walking to the camp.

The camp was located several hundred mails away from the mansion. It was surrounded by a barrier created with Ancient Magic. The barrier covered an area about ten mails across. It made it impossible for outsiders to see or enter the camp.

If an unsuspecting hiker was approaching the camp, his walking direction was insensibly shifted by the barrier.

When Ali approached the camp, the surrounding landscape visibly distorted.

He crossed the barrier. This is where they had lived for the last few days.

Alie brought Saito into a tent and laid him on a cot.

Saito was going to sleep for quite a while.

Suddenly materialized "water" had helped Ali to capture Saito. Without it he wouldn't have been able to use a powerful enough spell. Ali thanked The Great Purpose.

A bit later the barrier opened again and Luctiana and Idris returned. Ali asked, surprised, "Hey, Luctiana, who is it?"

Idris carried a girl on his shoulder. She seemed to be unconscious. She didn't move when Idris laid her beside Saito.

It was Tiffania.

Ali instantly noticed her ears.

"Elf! She is an elf, right?"

"No, not pure elf. Half-elf I think. The eye shape is the same as the barbarians," Luctiana said, looking like a scholar.

"Where did you find her?"

"I tried to examine the mansion, and she arrived with a dragon. Do you think she is one of them?"

"Hey! Half-elf!" Madalf screamed.

Half-elf, half-barbarian! Disgusting creature for a proud elf. Tainted blood.

"Disgrace for the elves!"

Madalf tried to shoot a spell at Tiffania, but Luctiana stopped him.

"Wait! Stop it!"

"Why? This creature brings shame upon all of us!"

"She is a valuable specimen. An elf who lived in the barbarian's world. She is unique. Anyway, this is my work and I won't allow it."

"Hey, are you planning to take her with us?" said a surprised Ali. Luctiana nodded confidently.

"Of course. And not just as a specimen. I have lots of questions. An elf descendant was living with 'them'. I have to find out how it happened."

No one could argue with that.

Ali nodded, convinced.

"You will be responsible for her. However, if she appears to be dangerous, we are leaving her. Do you agree?"

"Excellent," - nodded Luctiana.

"So, chief, what's the plan? If we drag them with us their friends will be looking, right? Barbarians are not stupid. Now that they know we are here, will we be able to return to Sahara?" said young Idris in a worried voice.

"We could use this kid's dragon" quickly said Luctiana.

Ali shook his head.

"It's too dangerous. Barbarian dragoons would spot us immediately."

"So what if they spot us? They already know we are here. Shouldn't we return as quickly as possible?"

"There are too many of us to carry. The power of land spirits diminishes with height, so we wouldn't be able to rely on magic. I can't allow this."

Defeated by Ali's arguments, Luctiana pouted. "What should we do then?"

Ali knew a method of escaping from the enemy who was aware of their presence. It was simple and effective. However, could he convince his two companions...

"In short, I will use 'change' to look like a barbarian."

Idris's and Luctiana's faces turned light green.

"To take the form of a barbarian!? You've got to be joking!"

"We will not need it all the time," Ali said. He wasn't enthusiastic about this idea either. It was difficult for proud elves to accept the appearance of barbarians.

"It's ok, isn't it? I wanted to do it once," cheerfully said Luctiana.

"Sorry, but I can't!" spat out Madalf.

"Madalf, the Council ordered us to quietly take him and return by any means necessary. The end justifies the means."

Some time later, the brooding Madalf cast the revolting spell.

"The wind that surrounds me, change my appearance."

Pale light surrounded him and his face changed. He become a sober middle-aged man.

"It looks bad. I didn't observe barbarians much."

The other elves also cast the "change" spell. Ali saw the new Luctiana form and reflexively covered his mouth.

"What? What's so funny?"

"Nothing, you look good."

Luctiana had turned into a clown. Her face was heavily powdered and her eyes were surrounded with blue paint.

Ali had also changed his appearance. His ears had shrunk, but his face didn't change much.

He asked everyone to check each others disguise.

"Then we'll leave. Idris, keep the 'sleep' spell on the barbarians. We don't want them to wake up."

Same day, noon...

Louise woke up in a bedroom of Des Ornieres. Colbert was in the room, looking at her with a worried expression.

Tabitha was laying next to her. It was a big bed so there was plenty of room.

Tabitha's chest was bandaged, likely the result of the confrontation with the elves.

"She will be fine. Nothing life-threatening," - Colbert said.

"Saito? Where is Saito?"

Colbert and Kirche exchanged glances. He tried to calm down Louise.

"Guiche and the Ondine Knights are looking for him. I also notified the Royal Palace. They will send a pursuing party immediately."

Louise tried to get up and fell back onto the bed. She still couldn't control her movements.

"Please stay in the bed."

"I can't! Saito was kidnapped!"

"I know. But you still can't move. Trust Guiche and the Royal Palace" said Colbert.

Louise fell from the bed and started to crawl to the door. With a pained

expression, Colbert cast a spell.

"Sleep cloud."

Something like thin fog shrouded Louise's head and she fell asleep.

Kirche brought her back to the bed. The room door opened and Grandma Helen entered.

"I brought dinner."

Grandma didn't know what had happened last night. She began to set plates on a table.

"Hey, did they find Tiffania?" asked Kirche. Grandma Helen shook her head. Guiche wasn't really looking for Saito. Pursuit of the elves that had kidnapped Saito was left to the Royal Palace. Even if they had tried, his small group wouldn't be able to do much.

Guiche's group and Siesta were looking for Tiffania. She was supposed to arrive this morning. Her disappearance had become apparent when they found an abandoned dragon.

When Grandma left, Kirche asked Colbert "Maybe she was kidnapped by the elves too?"

"Most likely."

"This is horrible."

"You mentioned that you had fought an elf before, right?"

"Yes. I couldn't do much."

Colbert sighed. The reason of kidnapping seemed obvious. It was fear of the full potential of Void magic.

Elves are bold and resourceful, thought the alarmed Colbert. Caught off guard, they had kidnapped Saito and Tiffania.

Could the humans win?

It wasn't just the bunch that had gotten Saito.

The entire race of elves was skillful, both in Ancient Magic and conventional warfare. The army's pursuit was unlikely to succeed. For an experienced warrior, this was the only possible conclusion.

Louise thrashed about in her sleep. With her sense of responsibility, the moment she woke up she would rush out to rescue Saito.

Unfortunately, he couldn't allow that to happen.

They couldn't afford to lose Louise.

They were not prepared to take on the elves...

But how could they possibly prepare for it?

What kind of "preparation" could give them a chance against the elves?

With the trump cards of Saito and Void mage Tiffania kidnapped, what preparations would still make sense?

That said, they couldn't just do nothing. There was no guarantee that Saito was safe.

Colbert really felt that they were out of options. Maybe the Pope had an idea?

Anyway, now they could only pray for Saito's safety.

Colbert looked in the window. It was a bright sunny day outside...

There was not a trace of clearing in the dark clouds in his mind.

# Chapter 4 - Luctiana's Oasis

Saito woke up in a somewhat strange place. The bed he was laying on was normal.

*What is it...*

It was definitely strange. First of all, it obviously wasn't Des Ornieres.

A farm in the neighborhood?

*How did I get here?*

Anyway, something generally felt odd...

Assorted items decorated white walls. Paintings, dolls, tapestry. And a mirror with lots of jewelry.

Nothing strange by itself. He came to a conclusion. The decoration was strange; impossible even.

A hat rack was covered with a bucket for some reason. The bucket itself was decorated with a plume.

Umbrellas were hanging from the ceiling. Dresses covered the windows like curtains.

*Clearly, someone is crazy.*

The room was extremely hot. The owner must have lost his marbles due to the heat.

Well, another problem; he was fighting the Elemental Siblings, so why did he fall asleep?

Did they catch him?

Why would they do something like that?

While he was pondering on it, something moved on the bed next to him. The blanket strangely bulged on the right side.

*Hmm, what is it?*

Saito cautiously put his hand on top of the bulge.

It was an unusual sensation. Extremely soft, irresistible and magnificent. Saito pushed.

Surprisingly, the hand sunk. However, the bulge was elastic and pushed back. Happiness flooded Saito's brain.

Saito decided that it was the best thing ever.

Just a touch. How could it possibly be so satisfying? Something like that had happened when, as a kid, he was playing with a compound used to fit glass into a window frame. It also was difficult to abandon, but this feeling was far better.

Still, it definitely felt familiar.

It had happened before..., but when...

Right. It was that time...

Definitely, it was when Beatrice, Princess of Guldenhorf, was bullying Tiffania.

Huh? How is it possible? Tiffania? That half-elf?

But this was the same exact feeling.

No, it's impossible. Why would Tiffania sleep next to him?

Such fantasy. This is just wrong...

This must be just an incredibly realistic dream.

At that moment, a voice came from under the futon cover: "Ah!"

"Huh?"

He quickly turned over the cover and, indeed, found a trembling Tiffania.

"Tiffa!" said Saito. Tiffania opened her eyes.

"Saito?"

Apparently, the happiness-inducing bulge was Tiffa's breast.

Well, it was the wrong best-thing-ever. He was not supposed to touch this one. He did though, a lot, and it was so great he almost cried.

*But it wasn't on purpose, so it wasn't really my fault...* Saito thought.

Then he was ashamed of himself.

*Subterfuge. I must have noticed. I had a suspicion but pretended that I didn't! Because... because!*

*I wanted to touch it! I'm a guy! And it's huge! So, my mind was telling myself 'What is it? Hey, Saito, what's that? What?'* said a defensive internal voice.

*Because Louise doesn't have such a best-thing-ever.*

*To be honest, she is kinda flat. However, there is nothing wrong with that. It's ok. It's kinda cute. Just like herself. It's just that the shape is not that great... but I still like it a lot...*

*This is bad.*

Saito quickly looked around.

If Louise had seen him now, she would have read his mind like a book... and then his life certainly would be in grave danger.

However, there was no Louise.

Saito relaxed. Then he remembered.

There was nothing relaxing about the current situation!

"Are you all right? Really, are you all right?" asked Tiffania with a worried voice

while looking at Saito. What she saw was indeed strange and disturbing. Actually, Saito wasn't looking just strange, but more like insane.

He was bowing. Very fast. If there was a national bowing championship, he would probably win.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to be rude! It just felt so great...!"

"Ah..."

"Please wait! Please don't cry! Let me explain first! I couldn't resist! This thing tricked me! Right, that's it! It tricked me to feel false euphoria! It was like the essence of happiness!" yelled Saito while pointing at Tiffania's breast.

He was spouting nonsense. Poor Tiffania, though, caught the part about her breast tricking him. She was about to start crying.

"Um, um, I'm sorry... This thing is weird, right? Still weird. It does such things. I also think so. I mean, no one else has it swollen like that so... I,... I'm strange."

As Saito says, "I'm strange"...

"Waah..."

"No! No! Really! It isn't strange! Really!"

Saito again demonstrated his bowing proficiency.

"But it is magnificent, and seeing it excites me. And I am trying to fight it..." said Saito with genuine remorse in his voice. It was dangerous for him to be in such a small room with Tiffania's breast. Louise wouldn't like it at all.

"I'm such an insect. Someone should kill, or rather, crush me."

Tiffania shook the grumbling Saito's shoulder.

"Calm down. By the way, where are we?"

"Right! No time for it! I also want to know it! Where the hell are we?"

"Hmm... I was going to your mansion. Did you know that I was going to summon a familiar?"

Saito had forgotten about it, but it certainly was correct.

"I was nervous and couldn't sleep, so I left early. I arrived and came to your

mansion. In front of the gate I suddenly became sleepy and... woke up here. Saito?"

Saito told Tiffania about the attack of the Elemental Siblings, the strange transmutation of earth into water, and the sudden sleepiness...

"Just like me. Maybe the people who attacked you kidnapped both of us!"

"Hmm, unlikely. They wanted to kill me, and there is no reason for them to kidnap you."

Then Saito noticed Tiffania's dress.

"Tiffa, the dress..."

She wasn't wearing her usual grass green dress. It was replaced with a spacious fluttering robe.

"Oh? This... What is it?"

Tiffania gently pinched the robe.

"I've never seen a robe like that."

"This is... elvish."

"What do you mean?" asked Saito with a surprised voice.

"It looks like a robe that my mother had."

Why would Tiffania wear elvish dress? The room door opened and the answer to his question became obvious.

"Oh," was all that Saito could say.

The newcomer was definitely an elf.

A completely naked elf.

More importantly, it was a young woman. Narrow vertical pupils. Long blond hair casually cut. She looked like a mix of Tiffania and Louise. Well, her breast peeking from a towel gap was definitely on Louise's side of this mix.

She looked like a fairy drying herself up with a towel. Tiffania also looked 'fairyish', but her chest somewhat undermined the illusion.

This one was a real 'fairy'.

"Oh! Are you awake?" the elf asked in Gallish language, the official language of Halkeginia.

Lack of clothes didn't seem to concern her at all. Without waiting for Saito's

reply she went to the center of the room, took a dried fruit from a rapier there and started to slowly eat it.

This attitude was somewhat familiar to Saito.

That's how Louise had acted when he had just arrived into this world!

Right. This elf doesn't consider him a guy. He suppressed rising irritation. Tiffania seemed to be frightened; her ears were down. Apparently she was afraid of this elf.

Saito nodded to Tiffania.

"I am here. I will not let them harm you."

Tiffania nodded back a few times and hid behind Saito.

Saito stared at the elf woman.

*Cos-play?.. No, it can't be, but why an elf is here?*

*It doesn't make any sense.* Saito, trying to remain calm, asked the elf.

"I have a few questions. Do you mind?"

"Please, feel free to ask anything. By the way, my name is Luctiana. Nice to meet you."

"Where are we?"

"In the desert. This is our country, Nephthys."

Saito was confused for a moment.

"What are you talking about?"

Then it dawned on him. The reason the elf was here. A very obvious reason.

They were kidnapped by the elves!

And they brought them to their country!

"No way!" blurted a dumbfounded Saito.

"Why would I lie about it?" replied an amazed Luctiana.

"Prove it."

"Prove? You say the darnedest things." laughed Luctiana.

"Well, I was fighting with the Elemental Siblings in Des Ornieres! How could I end up in the country of the Elves?"

"During the fight, you were put to sleep by magic."

"Who did this? Was it you?"

"No, not me. It was Ali."

"Who is this Ali?"

"He happens to be my fiancee."

When he suddenly became drowsy... it was elvish magic. Saito paled. Tiffania clenched his hand.

"The Elemental Siblings were just a decoy..."

"Decoy? This is just silly. Why would we need a decoy? Weren't you fighting for your own reasons? Well, it did help us. Ali mentioned it."

There seemed to be no connection between this elf and the Elemental Siblings (well, not that it made any difference.)

"The country of the Elves, huh?"

"Is this really the country of the Elves?"

"She already told you so! Now, silly, look out the window. See?" said Tiffania, and led him to the window. Behind the trees there was a vast sea of sand.

"It's a... desert."

Saito trembled.

He was somehow brought far far away from Halkeginia.

To the country of the Elves, no less. Populated exclusively by Elves.

Their mortal enemies.

What the hell was he supposed to do?

Saito was confused. He wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. His body's instinctive reaction was to run away from this room, but he couldn't leave Tiffania behind.

He turned around. Tiffania had fainted. It seemed it was too hot for her so Saito picked her up.

"I changed her clothes because she was unconscious." said Luctiana, but Saito didn't listen. He lost it for a second, but Tiffania's presence helped him to recover his presence of mind.

*Keep it together. Tiffania needs you.*

He was fighting his fear and anxiety.

It took him quite some time to accept the new reality.

Saito took few deep breaths, raised his chin, and turned to Luctiana.

It seemed that the elf woman had no immediate intention to harm them.

Tiffania was still unconscious. He gently put her on the bed and covered her with a blanket.

"Well... I don't know what questions you would agree to answer so I will just go ahead and ask you. Ok?"

"Please do. You can ask me anything." replied Luctiana, looking at him with interest.

"What day is today?"

"Eight days have passed since you were taken."

So, they put him to sleep for entire week. It wasn't really surprising, elves were strong mages.

Then he asked the main question. It wasn't easy to ask it, but he had to know.

"Was anyone killed in the process of our kidnapping?"

Luctiana shook her head.

"I don't think so, but there were some injuries."

"Who was injured?"

"I didn't see it myself, but I heard it was a girl."

Saito's heart skipped a beat.

"Was it a serious injury?"

"Perhaps, I don't really know."

Saito clenched his fists. Probably it was Louise or Tabitha. It was someone who tried to help him against the odds. Most likely it was one of those two.

Luctiana didn't know who was hurt and how badly.

"I apologize for hurting your friends. But it had to be done."

Saito decided that eventually he would repay his friends' injuries.

But not now.

Luctiana was looking at Saito with interest, legs crossed.

Well-proportioned Luctiana looked now like a girl from a pinup. But, probably because of the elf's attitude, Saito wasn't attracted to her. Her interest was the interest of a researcher looking at an unusual animal.

Indeed, the elf was even more arrogant than Louise had been in the past. *Typical*

*for this long-eared bunch,* Saito cursed under his breath.

Luctiana, still naked, was looking at him with curiosity.

Saito, with suppressed anger in his voice, continued.

"Why did you kidnap us?"

"Isn't it obvious? You are the protector of 'Demon'."

Saito silently stared at her. Luctiana nodded.

"You are trying to bring back the Demon's power. This is unacceptable."

"So, why did you kidnap me?"

"They need everyone involved to restore the Demon's power, right? We took you to prevent it."

Luctiana smiled.

Saito gulped.

The Four of Four have to gather to restore "true" Void power.

Why do the elves fear it so much? What is so scary about it?

"Well, er, ..."

"My name is Luctiana. And you are, hmm, Sat, Saet... "

"Saito."

"Barbarians' names are hard to remember."

Saito asked the most essential (at the moment) question.

"So, what are you going to do with us?"

Luctiana's answer was rather disappointing:

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"As long as rhe Demon's power is dormant, all is good. We just need you alive."

"I see."

Elves knew that if a Void mage or familiar die, the power would just be passed to someone else.

"Well, that's why you are here. As long as you behave, nothing else is to be done."

"How long we will be here?"

"Hmm. I don't know."

"Forever?"

"Well, I don't think so, but I don't know for sure."

Behind Saito Tiffania gasped in dismay.

Apparently, she had recovered from her faint and was listening.

Saito took Tiffania's hand to reassure her. She grasped his hand.

"Why did you choose me and Tiffania?"

"You are famous. Didn't you defeat my uncle once? You are the strongest of them, right?"

Indeed, when Saito had been helping Tabitha, he had fought with an elf serving King Joseph. After the King's death the elf had returned home...

"So, you are relatives."

"Yes. Uncle praised you. He doesn't praise barbarians much."

"Thank you. But why did you kidnap Tiffania?"

He expected her to reply that Tiffania being a Void mage was the reason. But it wasn't.

"This child is a half-elf, isn't she?"

Luctiana's eyes suddenly shone brilliantly. Tiffania nodded.

"This is soooooooo interesting! For you too, right? Looking at this room it should be obvious that I am a scholar studying the barbarians."

Luctiana stood and proudly threw out her chest. What is wrong with this elf, thought Saito. Meanwhile his eyes were glued to her beautiful slender body.

He thought of another girl he had seen recently, and blushed. Anyway, this "barbarian" crap was getting old.

"Listen, could you stop calling me a barbarian?"

"Why? Shouldn't I call a barbarian a barbarian?" said a surprised Luctiana.

"It's offensive."

"It wasn't intentional. So, how should I call you?"

"Use my name, OK?"

"Got it. 'Saala'? What was it?"

"Only the 'Sa' part is right. It's 'Saito'."

After that Luctiana started asking her questions. Very different questions. Starting with lifestyle, like "what do you eat", "draw a floor plan of your home", "what kind of furniture do you use". And ending with social structure, agriculture, monarchy of Halkeginia, industry, commerce and so on.

Since Saito came from another world he couldn't answer most of these questions. Tiffania, who spent most of her life as a hermit, wasn't much better.

Luctiana seemed to be very disappointed.

"Well, let's do it again sometime soon?" she said.

"Why are you so curious?"

"I told you I am a scholar, right? So, it's unnatural for me to say it, but you are not all that interesting after all."

"Couldn't care less."

"What? You should be grateful. If I didn't bring you here you would be in a Kasbah dungeon now."

"You kidnapped us against our will!"

Saito was clearly very irritated but Luctiana completely ignored him. As if she suddenly remembered something, she asked the next question.

"You! Tiffania, right? Were you bullied for being a half-elf?

Saito and Tiffania looked at each other. Luctiana seemed to be the type that can just stop noticing a person she was talking with a moment ago, just like Louise when Saito first met her. But for Louise it was a way to fight her inferiority complex, and here it seemed to be just a natural ability.

Maybe all elves are like that...

In that case negotiating with them will be very difficult.

Tiffania looked at Saito; he nodded.

Tiffania said in a troubled voice "Yes, at first. But not now..."

"Hmm. I see."

Then Luctiana turned to Saito.

"How strong is prejudice against the Elves?"

"It's not prejudice, people just fear you."

"Why?"

"Well, you used strong Ancient Magic. Halkeginia's nobles suffered a lot from it,

right? Naturally they are afraid."

"Hmm. Too bad. When under attack one has to defend themselves, right? We were really desperate. And with your numerical superiority..."

"What about our kidnapping? For no reason!"

"It had to be done to prevent your attack on us."

"Return the Holy Land peacefully and there will be no attack!"

"What? What are you talking about? It always was our land. You just arbitrarily declared it Holy Land."

Really? Saito looked at Tiffania.

"I'm sorry... I don't know either."

*Hmm, the place of Founder Brimir's advent. It likely was a land... It very well could be elvish land. History is full of convenient interpretations,* Saito thought to himself.

But he couldn't admit it aloud.

"Well, anyway, ownership aside. Miss Elf, your point is that elves are not a bunch of demons, right? Let me say something."

"Go ahead."

"Well, our land... Halkeginia I mean, there is a big problem with it. It is not going to last long, you know?"

Saito took a dish from the table and lifted it mouthing a "gogogogogo" sound effect.

"Wind stones will reach critical mass and lift the land. Seriously. So we need a magic device that Founder Brimir left in the Holy Land."

Luctiana seemed to be puzzled.

"I never heard of any magic device at Shaitan's Gate."

"Really?"

"I don't know if something like that exists. An ordinary elf can't just go there."

"Where is it?"

"Hmm, I can't tell you that. Think it through. You don't want to know it. If you knew it, you definitely would be sent to a dungeon." said Luctiana in an amazed voice. Well, it made sense.

"But you do understand our problem, right? Well, humans and elves were enemies before, but aren't we all just people living on the same land?"

"It is not the end of the world. If land is to be lifted by wind stones, it is a part of The Great Purpose. If we are all 'just people', humans should accept it too."

It was a rather cold reply. Tiffania, who was quiet all this time, said.

"Wow! My mother was an elf too, but she wasn't heartless like you!"

"I am not particularly heartless. Any elf would give you the same reply."

Luctiana stood up.

"Well then, I will take a nap. A full stomach makes me sleepy. Feel free to eat anything here. Also, you can use this bed. There is just one here, so bear with it."

Luctiana looked at them.

"Don't try to run away. We are surrounded by desert; you would last about half a day. Also, don't try to attack me. The house is enchanted; you would be burned to ashes instantly. I am just mentioning it because I don't want to lose valuable research subjects."

After nonchalantly giving this horrible warning, Luctiana went to her room. Tiffania shook her head.

"I am sorry, Saito."

"Why?"

"I am a half elf. I imagined my mother's people to be just like her: kind and compassionate..."

"You have nothing to apologize for. Elves are elves, you are you."

"...right. Thank you."

Saito was laying on the bed with hands folded under his head and stared at the ceiling. Although it was made of white clay, the surface was just as smooth as Earth's plastic. Just from the look of the walls of this room it was clear that elves are more technologically advanced than Halkeginia's kingdoms.

"Everyone is probably worried about us." he muttered. Someone was injured and their friends must know that they were kidnapped by the elves.

Saito got up and went outside. Tiffania followed him.

There was a round pond about hundred mails across. The deep blue water shone in the sun. A line of trees and bushes surrounded the pond, so bright that they seemed unreal.

A pier led from the door of the small white house to the center of the pond. Outside the tree line was desert.

Apparently it was an oasis in the desert.

"It's not that hot, is it?" Saito said. The extreme heat of the desert seemed to be balanced by the presence of the pond.

*I will check the warning about lasting half a day a little.*

Saito ran through the tree line. A vast desert lay in front of him. Mind-blowing. If he crossed it, would he reach Halkeginia?

*I should look for a map later.*

*Anyway, I will walk a little and see what I can see...*, thought Saito, making the first step into the desert. He felt fine sand under his feet.

Worried, Tiffania asked, "Is it safe, Saito? Can you get lost out there?"

"It's ok. I will just walk to the top of this dune," Saito pointed in that direction.

He started to walk and immediately felt the changes. After just ten steps, heat surged in from above. Direct sunlight in the desert was unbearable.

"Wow! What the hell! It suddenly became so hot!"

His bare head was almost burned. Walking even a few kilomails dressed like that was out of the question.

Saito ran back.

"What's wrong?" asked a surprised Tiffania.

"It suddenly became very hot! What the hell!"

Coming back he felt a crossing of a thin boundary he didn't notice before. Behind it the temperature was comfortable. He looked back and saw a faint wall of air staying in place, just like a real wall.

This wall surrounded the entire oasis.

"Magic barrier."

Saito was amazed. That must be it... magic protects the oasis from sunshine... it surrounds the oasis like a dome.

"What kind of magic is it?"

Saito sighed in admiration. Magic was used in Halkeginia everywhere, but he had never seen anything on this scale.

Elves could casually use a spell like that to solve a routine problem. Their capabilities were amazing. He remembered Luctiana's warning. He'd better be careful around her. She wasn't bluffing. It's all real.

Tiffania also noticed the barrier and her eyes rounded.

"Elvish magic is amazing..."

Night of that same day...

Saito sat on the pier looking at the night sky. He had gotten back his katana... Luctiana had casually put it into her large collection of swords.

She didn't try it to hide it because she didn't consider it dangerous.

Saito was at a loss. Far from returning to Halkeginia, just running away seemed to be impossible and there was no point to argue with the elves. There was no way to let anyone know where he was.

It was a dead end.

He was anxious.

The Holy War had been stopped, right? It seemed to be silly to worry about it. Now that the elves had kidnapped them, there was no way to proceed with it.

Will they just abandon the idea?

And Louise; will he never see her again..? He bit his lip to hold back his tears.

He heard a voice from behind.

"Saito?"

He turned around and saw a worried Tiffania.

"Are you ok?"

Saito quickly produced a smile.

"I'm fine."

Tiffania sat next to him. She closed her eyes and put her feet into the water.

"It's cold. Feels good. Wanna try it?"

Saito laid back. Without any obstruction, the stars shone like beads in the night desert sky.

This view dissipated his sadness.

"This is the country where your mother was born. I hoped to visit it one day... not like this of course. Still, it's a dream come true. Good, isn't it?"

Tiffania nodded.

"Hey Saito. I have a request."

"Sure, what is it?"

"I want you to kill me."

"Haaaaa?" Saito got up and stared at Tiffania. "Whaaaat!"

He saw tears in her eyes.

"I mean, without me the power will pass to someone else. I couldn't do much before and now I am kidnapped."

"We are both kidnapped!"

"You will escape. You can do it. I mean... you did a lot of amazing things before. But I am different. I am strange and I'm holding you back..."

"Don't ever say that..."

A shocked Saito grasped Tiffania's shoulders.

"It was such a mystery. Why me..., someone such as me got this legendary power? Everyone else is amazing, I am nothing but a burden for them..."

"That's not true... you're wrong!"

"If I stay here, everyone will be in trouble. The land will rise and there will be no place to live. They will not be able to restore Void magic and use it to negotiate with the Elves."

Tiffania looked at Saito. She was serious.

"If you die everyone will grieve! What are you talking about?"

"Who is 'everyone'?"

"Me! Louise! Everyone in the Academy! The children you were looking after!"

"Maybe, but if I stay here everyone will be in trouble. So... escape..., please..."

"Then we both will escape!"

"You can't escape with me..."

Tiffania started to cry. Even though somewhat self-conscious, she usually was unfazed by anything and seemed to have a laid-back personality. It appeared that meeting a real specimen of her mother's race really shook her...

*It was a shock for me, and no doubt for Tiffania it was much worse. After all, half of her blood is elvish...*

Saito gathered all the willpower he could master.

*I wasn't strong enough...* When Tiffa contemplated such a resolution, giving up wasn't an option for him.

First Saito gave himself a good slap on the cheek. Then he grabbed Tiffania's shoulder.

"Leave it to me."

There was no self-confidence. He didn't have a good plan. Maybe Tiffania's idea to throw her life away was the best of their options.

But he would never accept it.

"Yes. Then, the request..."

Tiffania closed her eyes and stuck out her chest to Saito.

"No! No! That's not what I meant!"

Saito yelled and shook his head.

"...Huh?"

"I will persuade the elves somehow."

"But..."

"I will do it, Tiffa. I..., no, we will do it together. Well, if we die the force will go to someone else. It could work. But the hell with it. I don't want anyone to sacrifice themselves for me and I don't want to become anyone's sacrifice. There is no guarantee it would work anyway, even if someone else got this power."

"But the elves are so powerful. You saw it. They used magic to protect this oasis even though just one person lives here! They don't listen to us. And I am a half-elf..."

"It might help us, Tiffa, don't you think?" Saito said looking directly into her eyes.

"Huh?"

"You being half-elf may create some opportunities. Up to now, we haven't used it for our advantage. Maybe being kidnapped by the Elves gives us a chance. You could slip into the Holy Land and use the magic equipment. Then everything would be fine even without the Crusade and true Void power."

Tiffania looked at him for a while. Then she looked down, bit her lip and nodded.

"I see. Sorry Saito. I was scared. I thought I was holding you here. It would be horrible. I would rather..."

"Don't worry. Don't do anything. If nothing else works I will use this."

Saito pointed to his katana. Then he remembered. Enchanted house...

"That reminds me, the Elves don't know you are a Void mage, right?"

"Huh?"

"She kidnapped you to study a half-elf. She didn't ask you about Void power at all, right?"

"Now that you mention it, she didn't."

"What happened with your wand?"

Tiffania nonchalantly took the wand from the gap between her breasts. Apparently the Elves didn't take it. Saito was amazed.

They had no plan yet, but the situation started to improve.

"Excellent, Tiffa. This is our trump card. Lets keep it hidden."

Tiffania nodded.

"Good. We may not be able to do much, but we will not know it until we try; so don't give up. And forget about dying. Ok?"

She nodded again.

"First of all, know your enemy. Luctiana says she wants to study us. We should study her too."

"Right."

Then Saito stood up.

"What happened?"

"First of all, I will swim."

"Really? In the middle of the night?"

"Sure. I like it. Of course, it has to be done right."

He said it very seriously, Tiffania involuntarily giggled. Saito jumped into the water as he was.

"It's like a resort back home! Hey, Tiffa, get in! It feels good!"

"All right."

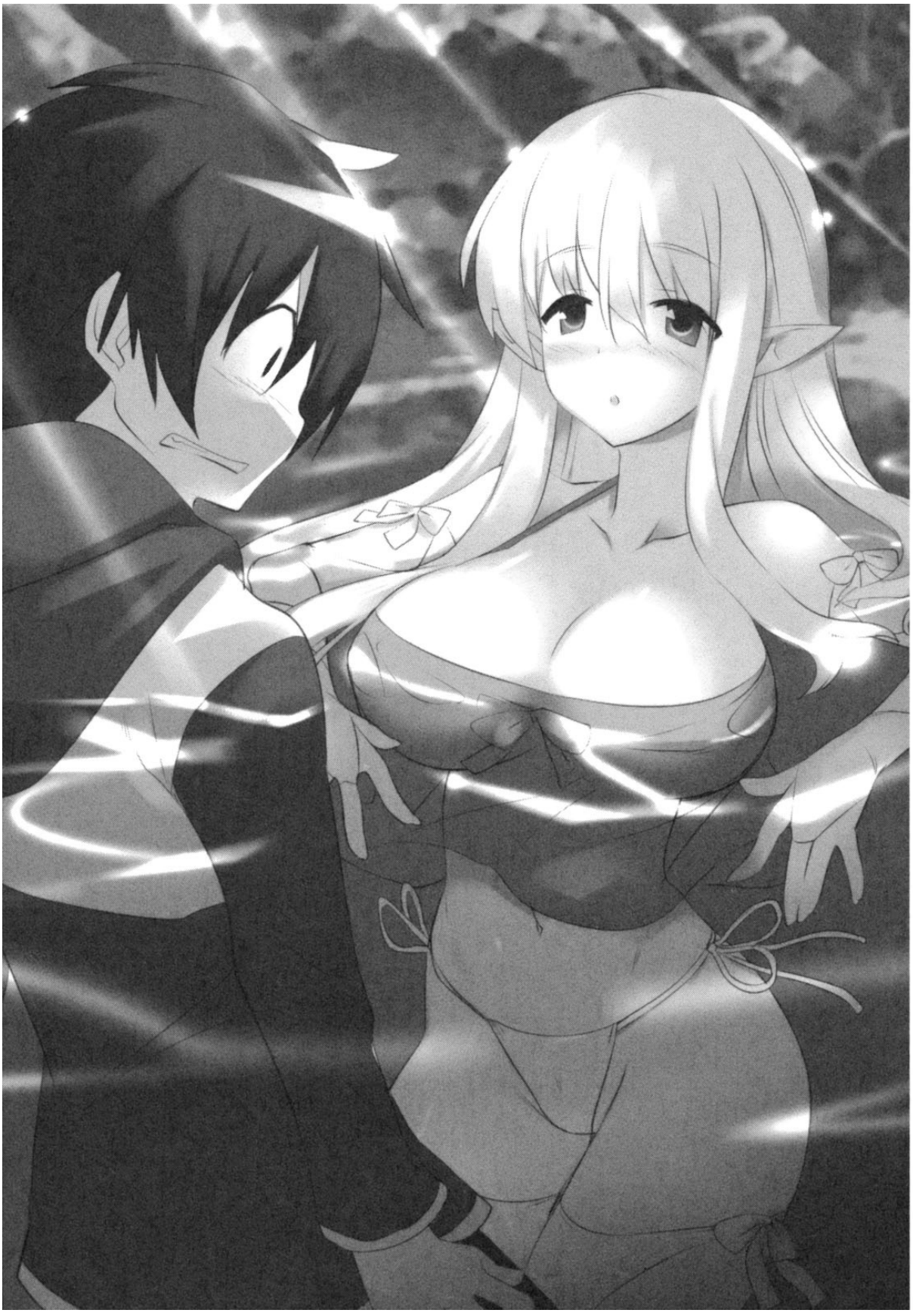
Tiffania stood up, took off her robe and jumped in the pond. With a splash she

disappeared under the surface.

"Tiffa?"

After about a minute Saito started to worry. Then, right in front of him, she suddenly emerged.

"Wow!" yelled the surprised Saito. Tiffania laughed.



"Turns out I can make long dives."

She said it so innocently that Saito tried to clear his thoughts. Moonlight and wet underwear made the shape of Tiffania's breasts very clear.

Saito realized that his mouth was wide open. Tiffania blushed.

"Sorry..."

Tiffania shook her head.

"It's fine. We are friends, so it's fine."

For a while they both looked down in silence. Then Tiffania began to swim slowly. In the moonlight she looked like a fairy pulled out of a painting. Saito couldn't take his eyes off her.

This view gave him courage.

'We can win. No, we will win. Me and Tiffania.'

'For everyone...'

# Chapter 5 - Ali's visit

Next morning...

Saito was awakened by sunlight flowing through a window. Tiffania occupied the bed, so he was sleeping on a couch. He couldn't sleep in the same bed with Tiffania again, even though Tiffania had said "we're friends, so it's fine;" Saito realized that it wasn't.

For example, he could touch something while tossing in his sleep. It was obvious for him that that touch, like a drug, would just switch his brain off; so he slept on the sofa. The view of her cleavage convinced him that it was a wise decision.

Tiffania slept peacefully. The spacious robe went awry in the night, and the resulting view was captivating. Saito tried to look away, but about ten seconds later he childishly convinced himself that it was an encouragement from God.

Actually, a difficult mission was ahead of them both. It would be a waste if only he received the encouragement.

Saito thought about it and shook his head.

*This is wrong.*

Tiffania tossed in her sleep again. The loose robe shifted even more, and the Grand Canyon came into Saito's view. It was amazing.

Saito almost cried with excitement and joined his palms. Then Tiffania woke up. She noticed the state of her robe and Saito's gaze, blushed and covered her cleavage with her hand. Saito was very embarrassed.

*It was just a peep, wasn't it? Knowing me, would Louise be disappointed?* Saito mentally bowed to his sweetheart.

*Is there an instinct below love? Can I be above this instinct? Then I act like that not because of a flaw of human nature. It is because of my own flaw.* Saito mentally vowed to Louise to be strong.

*I will not look anymore. Because Louise is the best...* he muttered in his mind. He

gave a promise to Louise. It didn't happen often, but Saito made a mental promise of loyalty.

Tiffania murmured something almost crying.

"...weird. Definitely my chest is weird. It bothers you, doesn't it? Sniff..."

"No! Don't worry about it!" Saito hastily shook his head.

"What is happening?"

Door opened and Luctiana entered. Saito pretended that nothing happened. Tiffania gulped, she looked nervous.

Saito winked to Tiffania, she nodded.

"Did you have breakfast? Some fruits in this oasis are very good."

Saito raised his hand, Luctiana noticed.

"Huh? What happened?"

"I have something to discuss. Let's negotiate?"

"Negotiate what?" Said Luctiana with blank expression.

"I would like to talk with the Elf leaders."

"What? Again? You want to see Shaitan's Gate and the so-called magic equipment?"

"Exactly."

"Didn't I say already to forget about it?"

Saito nonchalantly declared.

"Then I will die."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Tiffania was looking at Saito waiting for signal to intervene. He nodded.

"Ah! This guy will do as he says!"

"Yes I will."

"Die! Stop this nonsense! Hey Saito!"

"Ah. Nonsense."

This was the strategy they came up with yesterday. The Elves needed Saito alive. They had agreed to keep Tiffania's ability to erase memory as a trump card.

Luctiana looked at them alternately and started to laugh.

"Funny! You guys sure have strangest ideas!"

Saito blushed.

"Why are you laughing? If I died, wouldn't it be a problem for you? A new familiar..."

"I can see it in your eyes. You are not really intending to die, are you?"

Saito didn't have a response for that.

Luctiana stared at him.

"You'd better not say something like that in front of other elves. Suicide, huh? You would lose your heart."

"Huh?"

Lose heart... Saito remembered something Tabitha said about it.

Tabitha... an elf almost forced her to take medicine... If they hadn't rescued her in the last moment at the Alhambra, she would have "lost her heart".

"You should be grateful. The Council wanted to use it from the start. It would be safer. Only because I and my uncle vigorously objected can you guys still think clearly."

Tiffania and Saito paled. It was horrifying.

Luctiana mentioned someone else.

"Why did he protect me?"

"Hmm. He seems to think you are unusual. He said that he had a lot of questions for you, so you will meet him soon. My uncle is great. It's almost what you wanted. And please no more crazy ideas."

Saito and Tiffania exchanged embarrassed glances.

Then Luctiana continued her inquiry. This time she was mostly asking Tiffania.

"Who is your mother? How you were born?"

Tiffania glanced at Saito for support. He was sitting nearby.

Somewhat frightened, she started slowly describe her upbringing. Her parents were the Grand Duke of Albion and his mistress, an elf woman. Then her uncle, the King, sent soldiers to kill her parents.

She escaped and lived in a forest. And met Saito and his friends...

She told everything except for the fact that she had Void magic abilities.

Luctiana listened her story with interest, taking notes.

"What was your mother's name?"

"Father was calling her Shayal."

Luctiana smiled.

"It means 'pearl' in our language. I am sure she was beautiful."

Tiffania smiled shyly.

"Yes. She was very beautiful. Even though my childhood memories are faint, I remember this..."

"I will check. It is very unusual for an elf to go there; maybe I can find out more about her."

"Really?"

Tiffania was delighted.

"Yes. Maybe you have relatives."

Tiffania's smile faded.

"Right... But... I think..."

"What?"

"My parents loved each other very much. So, I think humans and elves can understand each other."

"Well, yes. That's why we can talk like this."

"In this case please take us to the 'Holy Land'! Otherwise a lot of people will die! And those who survive will lose everything!"

Luctiana become serious. It seemed that it wasn't a trivial matter for her.

"Frankly I was thinking about it. The cataclysm might be a part of the Great Purpose but just accepting it as such doesn't feel right. But keep in mind, very few elves would see it like this."

"Really?"

"Thank you very much!"

Tiffania and Saito bowed.

"For six thousand years we protected Shaitan's Gate. They say opening it would cause a horrible disaster."

"What kind of disaster?"

Asked Saito. Luctiana opened eyes wide.

"Huge calamity."

"But what is it?"

"People believe that six thousands years ago the 'Devil' came from Shaitan's Gate."

"What happened then?"

"They say every second elf had died."

Saito gulped. Tiffania paled.

"Did it really happen?"

"Who knows? Not all elves believe it. After all it was so long ago. But this is why Shaitan's Gate must be protected at all costs. You guys may be in big trouble but this is far from a trivial matter for us."

Saito and Tiffania looked at each other, both very concerned.

Something large splashed into the water outside.

"It's Ali!"

Luctiana went outside to meet her fiancee; Saito followed her. A large Wind Dragon was swimming to the pier with an elf on his back.

As the elf approached in long strides, Saito noticed a frown on his face. The elf's aversion to humans was rather obvious.

With an arrogant expression on his delicate face the elf was examining Saito as if he were a wild animal. It gave Saito a new appreciation of Luctiana's attitude.

Ali looked around the room and said in a sullen voice.

"Hey, I hope a barbarian wasn't sleeping in my bed."

Luctiana pouted.

"It's not yours, it's a guest bed."

"Anyway, I don't like a barbarian sleeping in an elf's bed."

Replied Ali glancing askance at Saito.

"Hey, you guys. We are leaving. Get ready."

Ali.

Is he the fiancee Luctiana mentioned yesterday? He is probably the one who put Saito to sleep. And Louise and Tabitha...

Saito couldn't suppress his anger anymore. It wasn't a good time for it. But he just couldn't.

"Bastard!"

Yelled Saito and threw a punch. As if he expected the attack, Ali dodged and knocked Saito down. He moved very fast, like a professional boxer.

Saito spectacularly fell. Tiffania rushed to help him get up. Ali wiped his fist with a handkerchief.

"Hey! Ali! Stop it!"

"He started it."

Saito tried to stand up.

"Bastard, how dare you... Louise and Tabitha..."

However, Tiffania firmly grasped his hand.

"Stop it. Saito, stop!"

Ignoring them, Ali said to Luctiana.

"You should modify the 'defense' spell so that it protected me too. Anyone visiting you can be attacked like that."

Saito gripped his katana. Ali noticed it and frowned.

"Hey, barbarian, don't. If you draw the sword even I can't go easy on you."

"Did you injure Louise and Tabitha?"

"Louise? Tabitha? Ah, right, they tried to stop us. I didn't kill the descendant of the Devil. Relax."

There seemed to be regret in his tone, as if he felt sorry about missed opportunity. Saito groaned and pounced again. Annoyed Ali dodged and responded with a sharp kick.

Saito blocked the kick with both hands and kept pressing.

"How dare you to attack my Louise!"

A full force hit reached Ali's face, he winced.

"This is for Tabitha!"

Another punch in the face. Ali tried to cast a spell but at that moment an umbrella hanging from the ceiling suddenly opened and fell, covering the heads of both fighters. They tried to get rid of it but for naught. The umbrella closed tight.

"Guys, so irresponsible! It's my house! You wanna fight, go outside!"

"Are you taking a barbarian's side now?"

Exclaimed Ali from under the umbrella.

"No, I am not! You just tried to use spirit magic in my house!"

Replied Luctiana glaring at Ali.

"Anyway, promise not to fight in the house. Otherwise you are not welcome here."

Luctiana snapped her fingers and the umbrella obediently returned to the ceiling. Ali, suppressing his anger, turned to Saito.

"Don't forget it, barbarian."

Excited, Saito was about to complain but was chided by Tiffania.

"I understand your feelings but..., calm down. Please."

Saito came to his senses and nodded.

"I'm sorry, Tiffa..."

"You have dangerous guests. Are you ok?"

Ali said to Luctiana; she nodded.

"Indeed. We had a lot of fun talking."

Ali become sullen.

"I wish you weren't so passionate about barbarians. Anyway, barbarians, get on the dragon. Lord Bidashal is waiting."

# Chapter 6 - Second meeting with Bidashal

After about a half an hour flight over the desert they saw a sea. Adyl, capital of Elves' country Nephthys, projected from the coast into the sea. It stretched as far as Saito could see.

Countless ships were cruising between multiple concentric landfills. Saito was astonished by the scale of this city.

Next to him, Tiffania was staring at the city with wide-open eyes.

It seemed that the city was far more advanced than Halkeginia's towns, which wouldn't look out of place in Middle Ages.

This view reminded Saito of pictures of an artificial city in the Middle East.

A city built in the sea... Which country was it...

It felt good to comb through memories about distant Earth.

Ali occupied a saddle near the wind dragon's neck. Saito threw him a hateful look.

Well, considering the technological backwardness of Halkeginia's humans, the elf's disdain for them might not be completely unreasonable.

But Earth's technology is even more advanced.

*The tallest buildings in this city are only tall for those who didn't see Tokyo and New York. He would weep if he had seen them, this long-eared bastard,* thought Saito.

Tiffania sitting next to him noticed his stare and took his hand.

"Don't start anything. If you were hurt, Louise would be sad."

Still, suppressing the anger was hard.

Then he though about Louise and Tabitha. They were hurt, are they ok? He

wanted to see Louise right now. But, being kidnapped, there was nothing he could do about it.

*Maybe I will never see her again.*

This thought suddenly crossed his mind. Saito shook his head to get rid of it.

*Don't even think about it. We will definitely meet again. I have to believe it...*

Tiffania noticed it and squeezed his hand to reassure him.

"It's ok, Saito. We will see them again. Definitely. I am sure."

It was pretty much what he had just told himself. Saito looked at Tiffania and squeezed her hand too.

"Certainly."

Luctiana sitting behind them noticed Saito's reaction and said.

"Amazing, right? Not many barbarians have seen Adyl from above."

Saito, irritated by the elf's condescension, replied.

"There are higher buildings in my home town. Don't be so arrogant."

Ali's face expressed his skepticism but Luctiana become curious.

"Interesting. What do you mean?"

"There are buildings three times taller than this central tower."

"Really? Where are you from?"

"Earth, the country is Japan."

Saito grinned. Luctiana looked confused.

"Where is it? I never heard about it. Is it one of the city-states near Romalia? I don't remember..."

"No, it's on another world."

Tiffania pulled his sleeve.

"Saito."

"Huh? Well, I don't think hiding it makes much sense anymore."

"Another world, What do you mean?"

Luctiana seemed to be very interested, she leaned forward.

"Hey, Luctiana. Don't believe everything the barbarian says," Ali said turning around.

He seemed to be annoyed. Luctiana stuck out her tongue at him, then said to Saito in a low voice.

"I would like to hear more about it later."

"Sure, if you can believe it."

The wind dragon under Ali's control began to descend. They approached the Kasbah in the center of Adyl, residence of the Council ruling Nephthys.

The dragon landed on the roof and was surrounded by elf warriors looking at Saito and Tiffania with curiosity; some of them smiled.

Someone pointed to Tiffania, and the elves gasped in surprise. Apparently half-elf Tiffania was much more amusing than "the descendant of the Devil" Saito. Tiffania shyly covered her ears.

An elf approached and said something to Tiffania in Elvish. She didn't understand him and looked confused. The elf tried to grab her hand.

"Hey, stop it."

Saito tried to intervene; a few elves immediately grabbed him and started to yell something. Saito heard word "shaitan" and decided that they were cursing.

One of the elves reached for a dagger on his waist.

Luctiana yelled something angrily in Elvish. After some altercation Ali separated the prisoners from the elves.

The warriors left looking disappointed.

Scared Tiffania hid behind Saito.

"What did they want?" Saito asked Luctiana.

"To kill you for meddling," she answered cheerfully. Saito paled.

"Wouldn't it be a problem for you?"

"It would. But you are a 'Devil' here, don't forget about it."

In the eyes of the elves looking at Saito and Tiffania was intense hostility. When Saito arrived in Halkeginia he was despised but never hated like that.

For the first time he felt vividly that they were in enemy territory.

*What does Bidashal want from us? What is there to discuss?* Saito thought with increasing anxiety.

When they all reached Bidashal's office, the guards left.

The Kasbah building's walls were beautifully plastered. Light colored tiles created a geometric pattern that livened up a dull room. It seemed to be extremely clean, a quality unusual for Halkeginia.

It felt somewhat uncomfortable for Saito... too refined and lifeless. Maybe he had just gotten used to the messy Halkeginia...

A bit later a door opened and Bidashal entered. The last time Saito had seen him was during their confrontation in Alhambra.

Saito felt a spike of anxiety. Back then the elf attacked him and Louise using powerful Ancient Magic.

He also created the "jewel of fire" that burned that fleet in Gallia...

However, the calm elf in front of him didn't look like a monster. In stark contrast with the young elves Saito just met, there was no open hostility.

As if their battle had never happened, Bidashal said "Long time no see, barbarian warrior."

Saito didn't quite believe what he heard.

Bidashal sat in a chair and invited them to sit. Then he started the inquiry.

"Well, I have questions. First of all, what do you call it... "Void"? Tell me the names of all the mages and describe their abilities. We know about a few of them but not everyone, I want to be certain."

Amazed, Saito answered.

"There is no way I am telling you that."

"There are many ways to get this information from you. Don't waste my time."

Saito didn't respond and Bidashal called someone. A young elf woman in a white robe came. She held something.

It seemed to be a vial of muddy liquid. A drug of some sort... Saito impulsively tried to grab Tiffania's hand and run. Immediately a myriad of tentacles grew from the floor and walls, fixing him in place.

Tentacles pried open Saito's mouth and the woman in the white robe poured in the liquid. Damn... there was nothing he could do. As if in a fever, his head became hazy.

When Bidashal repeated the question, Saito couldn't resist. The names just came out of his mouth.

Pope Vittorio, Louise, Joseph the King of Gallia, and the last one...

"What? Is she too?!" Cried Ali when Tiffania's name came out.

Bidashal was obviously amazed. Luctiana gasped. Tiffania rushed to uncontrollably shaking Saito.

"Saito! Are you all right? Saito!"

But Saito didn't respond. He just stared into nothing in front of him.

"Devil's power given to someone of elvish blood..."

Bidashal said with a sigh. Tiffania looked at him with hate.

"I always thought elves were kind people, like my mother!"

"There are different kinds of kindness, you see. I'm just doing what's necessary for all the elves."

"The humans are in grave danger! Barbarians you call them... Certainly, their culture and technology might be inferior to yours but even they have the right to live, don't they?" Tiffania desperately appealed but Bidashal answered adamantly.

"'Shaitan's Gate' will remain closed. We can't allow the calamity to happen again. As long as we live we will protect it."

"Nobody knows what would happen! It's just an ancient obsolete tradition!"

"We can't gamble with the fate of our race like that. We will always protect it. This is not a tradition, this is our duty."

"Why do you refuse to even consider this? Why?"

Tiffania fetched a wand from her cleavage. If she could make them forget...

But her attempt was immediately interrupted. Tentacles instantly grew from the wall and entangled Tiffania.

"I will keep this. It can be dangerous in the hands of the devil's descendant."

Bidashal took the wand from Tiffania's hand.

Saito realized what was happening in front of him but the magic somehow disconnected it from reality. It felt like he was watching a movie.

Tiffania was crying next to him held by tentacles extending from the wall. There were a few elves in the room. Then the tall one, Bidashal, sat in front of him and started to talk.

"Barbarian warrior, after I fought with you I got interested in the connection between our saint Anubis and Gandálfr. I read everything I could find about it."

"Ok."

Saito replied indifferently. He understood what was said but magic suppressed any interest he could have.

"Saint Anubis defeated the 'Devil' who brought the calamity; that's why he became our saint. According to records, his left hand was shining. There is a connection between Anubis and Gandálfr; it appears it was the same person. Very interesting."

At this moment the door opened and a secretary entered.

"Lord Bidashal, the Council has made a decision."

"What did they decide?"

Bidashal looked at the paper the secretary passed to him and slightly frowned.

"I see."

"What is it, uncle?" Luctiana asked, worried.

"The Council determined that they will take the 'heart loss' medicine."

Luctiana paled.

"Impossible! I was supposed to look after them, wasn't it settled already?"

The secretary apologetically said to Luctiana, "This was the decision of the Council, Miss Luctiana. They said that they wanted to exclude any danger."

"From an academic point of view this makes no sense at all."

"Anyway, the decision is made. It will happen in a week. Until then they will be held here."

Hearing the conversation, Tiffania started to tremble.

*Am I going to lose my heart? Me and Saito?*

Then she remembered the face of her mother.

*Country where gentle elves just like my mother live... I am a half-breed, of course they may not like me. That must be the reason...*

But she didn't expect anything like that. For the first time in her life Tiffania cursed the elvish blood flowing in her veins.

# Chapter 7 - Louise's Decision and Romalia's Choice

It happened five days before Saito met Bidashal in the Kasbah.

"There is no rescue party? How is this possible?"

Louise desperately pressed Henrietta. They were in Tristain Palace. Three days had passed since Saito's kidnapping.

Louise's numbness had finally passed and she could try to rescue Saito. She went to the palace first...

"An emissary from Romalia brought this letter."

Louise took the letter. It had the Pope's seal on it and just said "Please leave this matter to us."

"Then, please let me help them!" said Louise, but Henrietta shook her head.

"They want you to stay here."

"And Your Majesty accepted it?"

Henrietta nodded painfully.

"We are organizing an expeditionary army; our hands are tied... we can't send people to escort you."

Louise saw that Henrietta's decision was final.

"They likely kidnapped Tiffania too. Frankly, we know very little about the Elves. Romalia is much better prepared for it. They have been observing the Elves for quite some time."

After these words Louise was just about to say something really harsh, like where would the Princess be without Saito?

But she didn't. She had learned to control herself recently, and she understood Henrietta's position.

The Queen has to make sacrifices sometimes... no matter how painful they are.

"I understand. It must be difficult for you to say this, right?"

"Louise..."

"I apologize for my unreasonable expectations. I will take my leave then."

Louise bowed stiffly. Seeing this attitude Henrietta realized Louise's intentions. Once her childhood friend made her decision no one could ever talk her out of it.

So, Henrietta didn't say anything, just the usual "Be careful, Louise."

Louise left the palace sitting astride a horse. Newly-organized regiments were marching on the street. They probably were going to Champs De Mars training camp. Recruitment posters were plastered everywhere on the walls. Regiments frantically tried to replenish in preparation for the Crusade.

The city folk didn't seem to be concerned much, and city life went as usual. Probably people didn't understand what "continent rise" actually meant? Maybe they thought it was a problem somewhere far away, like Albion or the Fire Dragon Mountains. Or they just expected the nobles to deal with it somehow...

The road led her out of the city. It was getting dark, and Louise lit a magic lantern hanging from the neck of her horse. Hazy light illuminated the road.

She looked at the moons shining between the clouds and began to cry.

*Is Saito safe?*

*What horrible things have the elves done to him?*

This is what she didn't say to Henrietta.

The Elves wouldn't kill Saito. They really fear the resurrection of the Void... But they could use this horrible potion that they almost made Tabitha drink a while ago...

Then Saito would forget about her.

Even worse then that...

He wouldn't be himself anymore.

This would be unbearable. The only thing she cared about in this world would disappear. This thought scared her, and Louise cried.

Crying didn't help at all but she just couldn't stop.

When she arrived at Des Ornieres everyone surrounded her looking worried.

"How did it go, Louise?" Asked Guiche.

She shook her head.

"Tristain will not try to rescue them."

"Unbelievable! The guy is a national hero!" Malicorne lamented.

"Romalia will handle it."

"To rely on Romalia like that! They basically abandoned him!" Guiche exclaimed.

Eleonore folded her hands and declared. "Well, if amateurs rushed blindly into the Elves' country they would never return."

"What are you saying?" Yelled Guiche.

But Eleonore remained calm. "Any objections? This place was full of mages yet the kidnapping went smoothly. If a rescue group was sent without a plan it just would be obliterated."

Louise responded soberly.

Everyone tensed expecting a furious fight between the sisters. Eleonore had said the truth, but it wasn't the right moment to say it in front of Louise.

But Louise replied frankly "You are right. It's just as Eleonore said. There is no point. Leave it to Romalia."

Then she left and everyone, including Eleonore, stared at each other in disappointment.

Louise came to her room and wiped away the tears. She looked down for about ten seconds. Then she raised her chin and she didn't cry anymore. Determination sparkled in her eyes, lips turned into a straight line.

She started to pack a bag. A purse and underwear change, there wasn't much to pack. She would buy food on the way.

She would need to cross the borders somehow.

From Tristain to Gallia. And from Gallia to Sahara.

However, it wasn't an immediate problem. She took a document from her pocket.

It was a transit pass with Henrietta's seal.

The seal was real but the pass itself was forged. During her visit to the palace she had teleported into Henrietta's office and stamped the document.

Louise didn't count on help from Henrietta from the start because she realized that the Queen is not free in her actions.

Not so long ago she would just ask Henrietta for this permit. Now she felt that it wouldn't work...

Louise didn't want to involve the others in the mansion because this was a personal matter...

Considering the current situation in Halkeginia her actions were unacceptable. As a Void mage she should have been following the instructions from Romalia.

But she was anxious.

It was like a premonition.

*The Elves will force Saito to drink this potion...*

*Romalia doesn't care about Saito. But I do.*

They may even be right. Choosing between the fate of Saito and the future of Halkeginia shouldn't be difficult for them.

Even if Saito did lose his heart, it still could be reverted. Tabitha's mother recovered. Romalia may consider it to be a mere "inconvenience". It may make their choice to avoid immediate actions even easier.

Considering the recent actions of Romalia it seemed to be very plausible...

That was the main reason Louise refused to rely on Romalia.

*Absolutely unacceptable.*

When her backpack was ready, she opened a window and cast a teleportation spell.

Louise jumped across the street to the stables. Trying to keep the horse calm and silent she put a saddle on it.

When she was about to depart, there was a rustle in the bushes. Louise immediately raised her wand. Elves again?

A maid with luggage emerged from the bushes.

"Siesta?" Louise exclaimed

"Yes, it's me."

"What are you doing here?"

"The same thing as you. Please take me with you."

Apparently Siesta had guessed Louise's intentions and was waiting for her.

Louise sighed and said "Impossible. Forget it."

Louise tried to leave but Siesta blocked her way.

"I can't. I will go too."

"Listen, this time I can't. It's not like that time in Albion."

"I know it. You are going to the Elves, right?"

"Yes. The scary Elves, you know?"

"I know. I still want to go."

Apparently Siesta had decided to go no matter what.

"I am not joking! You are not even a mage. It's dangerous for a commoner. Do you understand?"

"I understand. But..."

Siesta started to cry.

"I can't just stay here and wait. If something happens... to Mister Saito... and Miss Valliere... life wouldn't be worth living. So I beg you, please take me with you."

Louise was deeply touched by Siesta's words.

"But this is impossible."

"Then I will yell! Everyone will know that Miss Valliere is leaving!"

"Well."

Siesta opened her mouth and breathed in deeply. Louise jumped to her and covered her mouth.

"Ok! All right! I am taking you with me, so please be quiet!"

Triumphant Siesta quickly tied her luggage to the saddle and climbed on the horse.

"Forward."

Well, Louise gave up. But at the same time she was somehow glad. Whoever your companion is, not being alone is reassuring.

They started to move and went out of the gate but were stopped by a blue-haired

girl with a staff.

"Tabitha? What are you..."

Louise started to ask but, surprisingly, Tabitha interrupted her.

"I will go too. I can't let you go like that. The Elves are dangerous. I fought one once. With Sylphid we can fly there."

Louise was speechless. Then Sylphid descended suddenly and sat in front of her.

"Right. Get off this slow creature. Climb on Sylphy."

Louise and Siesta were stunned. Sylphid grabbed Louise and put her on her back.

"Me too! Me too!" Cried Siesta and Sylphid loaded her too.

Then Tabitha joined them.

Louise stared at Tabitha, stunned. She wanted to say something but couldn't find the words...

Then she did. "Thank you."

Louise nearly cried. Naturally. Everyone was worried about Saito, not just her.

They flew on Sylphid's back in the night sky for a while... Then from behind came a strange sound.

Louise looked back. A huge winged shadow was gaining on them.

"Hey! Miss Valliere! No matter how light you gals are, Sylphid will get tired carrying you to Sahara!"

It was the magically enhanced voice of Colbert.

Sylphid happily yelled kyui kyui and flew toward the *Ostland*.

Everyone from the mansion was on the deck of the *Ostland*: Kirche, Malicorne, Colbert, Guiche, and surprisingly even Eleonore.

When Sylphid landed, Eleonore approached, folded her arms and yelled at Louise.

"Again, doing whatever you want! Why don't you ever consult with me!"

Louise trembled.

"Sorry! But if I told you about it you would never agree..."

"Are you saying that I am unable to understand you?"

"No!"

"Then talk to me. It's not like I reject everything, I am not a demon."

Malicorne shook his head. "You are scarier then a demon. You are the elder sister."

Eleonore kicked Malicorne.

"You can't call me elder sister!"

Malicorne hit the wall spectacularly.

Louise looked around with tears in her eyes and quickly bowed.

"Thank you, guys."

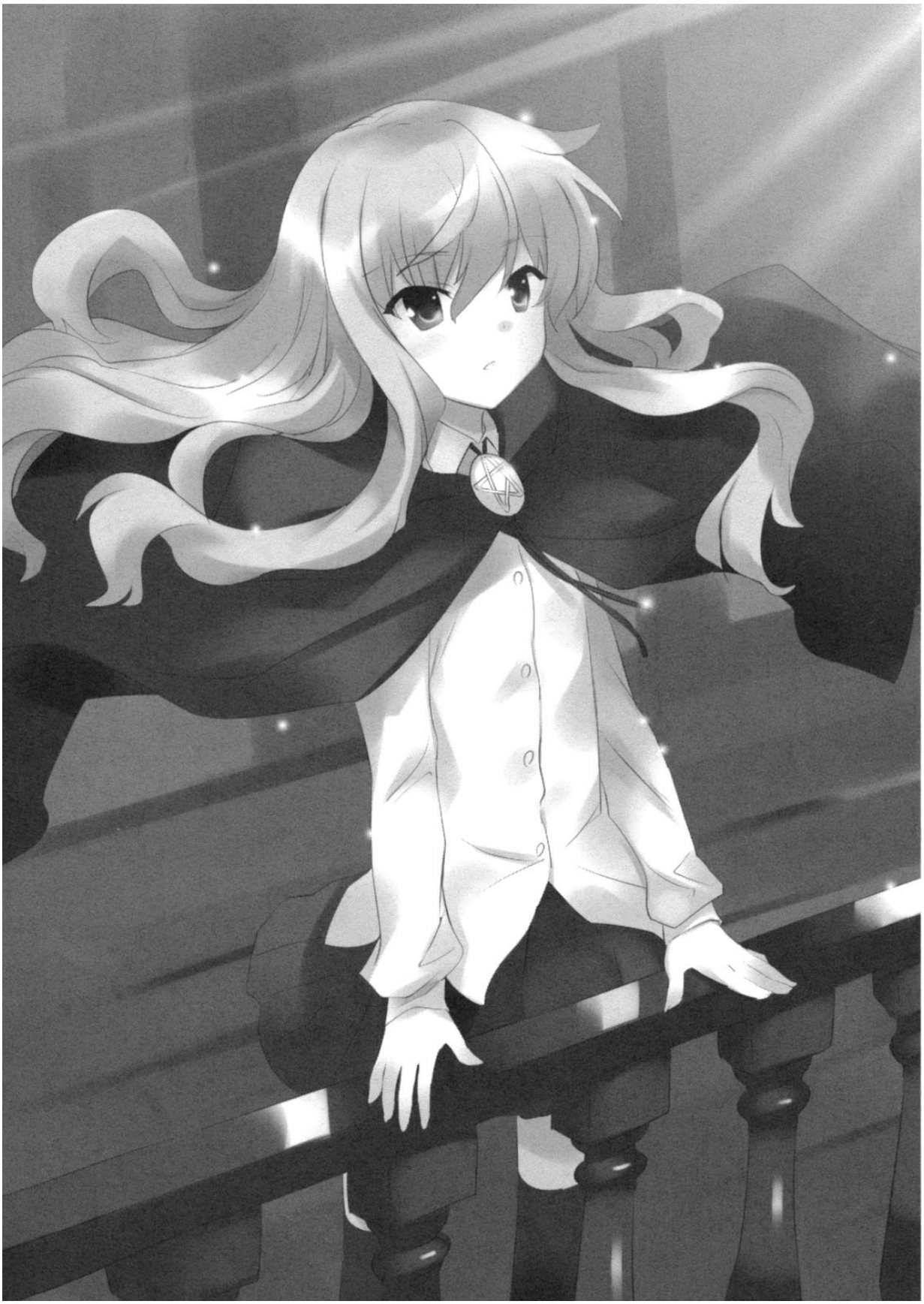
Kirche put her hands on Louise's shoulders and narrowed her eyes.

"Why did you try to do it alone?"

"Because... I just... I didn't want to bother..."

Amazed, Kirche replied.

"Bother? Stupid. One that can't be bothered to help a friend is not much of a friend."



Some time later everyone was fast asleep in the cabin...

Louise was alone on the deck looking at the night sky. Blue and red moons shone in a gap in the clouds.

"Hey, Saito" she said toward the moons.

"Do you also see the moons in the desert?"

It would be nice, thought Louise. She wanted to feel a connection.

"Saito, they are beautiful."

"Lets look at them together in Des Ornieres again."

Her wish flew into the night sky with the sound of the steam engines of the *Ostland*.

Next morning...

A single-horse carriage stopped in front of the "religious agency" in the center of the Holy Romalian Empire. A tall noble came out out of it, his blue eyes shining under long gray hair. A beautiful woman with sharp eyes followed him.

It was Wardes and Fouquet.

A girl, about fifteen yeas old, greeted them with a curtsy.

"My master is waiting" she said simply.

"Mikaela, why did the Pope summon us?"

This religious agency... Last month Mikaela, a maiden in the Pope's service, led Wardes and Fouquet here to introduce them to the Pope.

They were nervous and curious about that meeting but the Pope, Vittorio Cervale, didn't say anything interesting. It was just meaningless small talk.

So, forced to work for the Pope, they hadn't the faintest idea what would he want

from them.

"There is no reason for me to know it."

Replied Mikaela worriedly.

"I know. I just wanted to hear you say it."

Wardes smiled. Fouquet poked him.

"Don't tease the shrine maiden."

They were immediately invited into the Pope's office. Vittorio had just finished morning prayers and was sitting in a chair drinking tea.

When they came in, Vittorio stood up and invited them to sit.

"Please. Would you like some tea?"

Without waiting for their answer, Mikaela went to an anteroom and brought tea.

"Please."

The Pope sipped his tea.

"Ok, what do you want from us?" Wardes asked bluntly.

"Did you hear what happened at the Fire Dragon Mountains?" Asked Vittorio.

Wardes nodded. "Yes."

"This is what your mother was afraid of."

Wardes' eyes glinted. "You know it, huh?"

"We keep an eye on Halkeginia. It appears that your mother had a premonition."

Wardes silently waited. Fouquet was looking at Wardes and the Pope. She couldn't grasp the intentions of this young man. The most powerful man in Halkeginia invited them, two criminals, into his office without any concern.

She couldn't feel even a trace of greed in him. Indeed, his modesty was in stark contrast with the previous Popes.

She now understood the reason behind the jokes about the humility of the new Pope.

Yet Fouquet couldn't help but feel something ominous behind this mask of innocence. If she told Wardes about it, he would brush it away like a woman's silly intuition...

"It made her lose her mind. She wasn't a very strong person and just couldn't handle it."

"Simply put, I want you to help to resolve this problem."

"Me? What can I do about it?"

"Powerful magic equipment is hidden in the Holy Land. It belonged to the Founder Brimir. To get it back we need to gather the Four of Four, the bearers of the Void."

"Bearers of the Void?"

"People to whom Founder Brimir passed his power."

Wardes remembered the faces of Louise and Saito.

"I am not one of them."

"Indeed. Two of them were kidnapped by the Elves. I want you to rescue them."

"Oh. Who are they?"

"Gandálfr and Miss Tiffania, descendant of the Albion Royal Family."

Wardes smiled.

"I know Gandálfr."

"I am aware of the animosity between you two."

"In other words, you are sending us to the country of the Elves?"

"Basically, yes."

"What if the rescue is problematic?"

"In that case I want you to eliminate them."

Wardes smiled.

"You found the right man for this job."

"In that case the power will be passed to someone else. Rescue them if you can. Otherwise the greater good requires their sacrifice. Do you understand?"

"I see. When do we depart?"

"Immediately. We have several ways into the elvish country. You will pretend to be a peddler."

When Wardes and Fouquet left, a handsome teenager shifted a curtain and entered the room. His eyes were different colors. It was Julio.

"Indeed, the Elves are resourceful. It will be difficult to gather the Four of Four."

"What do you think about them?"

"It went well. Together they are among the best hit-men. Viscount Wardes is unlikely to fail. It will be a hassle to raise the new Gandálfr" said Julio. Vittorio nodded.

"It will take time... Frankly, it is unfortunate that fate made 'brothers' disposable."

Julio sadly smiled.

"I prefer the word 'martyr'."

"I agree. And I am getting tired of this 'there is a magic device yadda-yadda' story."

Julio didn't respond. He also knew the truth.

That device protected by the elves never existed...

Mikaela was in the room all this time. Vittorio ordered her "Please bring it."

Mikaela nodded and brought an ancient-looking mirror from Vittorio's study.

It seemed to be a usual round mirror. However, faded words written on the frame suggested that it was a very old item.

"The round mirror of the Founder... How much history was reflected in this mirror?"

This pocket mirror once belonged to the Founder.

"It reflected everything. Regrettable and cruel events. Along with the life of Founder Brimir."

Vittorio mentioned the "life" of Brimir.

"You shouldn't say it. It's blasphemy."

"He was a person. With his own worries, suffering and free will."

An outline appeared in the mirror, "life" written in ancient runes.

It was a spell of Void that Vittorio had learned recently.

It was a terrifying spell. Four mages could use it to put four treasures into resonance for the first time...

Four familiars had to be there too.

Gandálfr, protecting the chanters.

Myoznitnirn who makes the four treasures resonate.

Vindálfr, the "vessel" of the spell that turns into "Eye of the Four".

The fourth familiar's name also was written there indifferently.

"Lifsrasil," the Heart of God.

"You said that you don't want to remember this name in the song, right?" Vittorio asked the small mirror.

"Was it because of the guilt? Did you feel remorse because you were killing people of the same race as this familiar?"

There was no answer. The man who could answer these questions had died six thousand years ago.

But he left them the "mission"...

Staring at the rune of spell "life", Vittorio shook his head.

*Did my mother refuse to give this mission to me? Was it the reason she ran away with the ring?*

Vittorio wiped his eyes. Julio gently put a hand on his shoulder. Mikaela also put her hand on her masters shoulder.

The round mirror of the Founder glimmered faintly.

# Chapter 8 - Two Prisoners

"Damn..., nothing!" said Saito, hitting the door. They had spent two days here, and except for meal delivery they were left completely alone.

He remembered exactly the conversation with Bidashal under the influence of the "truth serum". The potion's effect had long since dissipated, but the damage was already done. The elves took the katana and the wand so Saito and Tiffania couldn't use their abilities.

The room wasn't bad. There were two beds, a chair, a desk and a neat rest room.

Still, it was a prison cell.

It seemed to be located underground. It was very different from Halkeginia's cells... the walls were thick and well plastered and a strong iron plate buried in the wall served as a door.

Saito's eyes were bloodshot from searching for any way to open it, but he didn't find anything.

"Saito, you'd better stop it. You are tired," said a worried Tiffania, sitting on a bed. She was right. Saito sat next to her.

"Do you think they really will use this potion..." said Tiffania with fear.

"That's what they say. They will do it."

Saito was frustrated. To spend the rest of his life in this place, mentally incapable... it was hard to imagine something worse.

It would also prevent Void resurrection... what would happen to Halkeginia?

Saito though about it all the time. They had to escape somehow. Twice a day a meal was delivered, but it was given through a small slot in the bottom of the door. There was no way to use it.

There was one option... Saito shook his head...

No, he can't do this... Tiffania needs him.

But he didn't see any other way.

"We Elves are quite merciless creatures."

Saito was confused by these words at first, then he shook his head.

"No, Tiffa, you are different!"

"That's good. I am glad. Just because my mother was an Elf I thought that they all were like her... friendly people." Tiffania looked pensive.

"I was thinking. Before we lose our hearts..."

"Forget about it, it's a bad idea."

"But... Isn't losing our heart the same as being dead?"

Saito had nothing to respond to this.

"If we have to die anyway, wouldn't it be better to help everyone? I am afraid to die. I want to live, but if it would help everyone... shouldn't we consider it?"

It was difficult to argue with Tiffania. There was no way for them to escape. Even if they could, they wouldn't be able to cross the desert.

Elvish magic is powerful. Even with a weapon, Saito's chances would be poor.

"If we die, humans will get new Void bearers. But if we stay here, out of our minds, everyone in Halkeginia will suffer."

"Tiffa..."

"It's not that I want to do something great, you know? I mean, I don't want to be a saint. What was the word? Martyr, right? No, I don't want it. It's just a simple calculation. Happiness of tens of millions of people versus one life. Rather simple, right?"

Saito didn't respond and Tiffania continued.

"This power... 'Void'. It was such a burden. Me saving the world, I never thought I could do it. And I still don't. But, thanks to it, I met you and the others and could see the outside world. I am grateful for it. I didn't do anything... I was just observing the others fighting. So, I want to help however I can in the end."

"You are helping."

"No. I am an alien to humans. If war with the Elves started I would have to hide. And I am an alien to the Elves, too. I wish there was a place where I belonged."

To Saito, Tiffania didn't look pathetic. She was very flustered but the way she thought about everything... even though she was getting along with everyone, there always was a line separating her from the others.

Involuntarily he blurted.

"There is such place."

"Where?"

"I will always be there for you."

Tiffania looked surprised.

"You are in love with Louise."

Saito said quickly.

"Hmm, ... not like that. As a friend. Friends can support you, right?"

Tiffania laughed.

"Thank you. But a lover is better than a friend."

Tiffania said it without any hesitation, Saito was confused. Tiffania quickly waved her hands.

"That's not what I meant. I am not coming on to you... There should be someone for me too. Someone else..."

"Ah, I see," said Saito to defuse the strange mood.

"Of course I didn't mean it! I know you don't like me like that!"

"Thank you, but I know better whom and how I like."

Tiffania laughed and said with a hint of anger in her voice.

"You know, it's pointless, Saito."

"What is?"

"This... me talking about friendship."

"What do you mean?"

"Because I want to rely on..."

She said shyly picking up the hem of her robe.

"To rely on you!"

Saito involuntarily grasped Tiffania's shoulders. Then he noticed it.

"Sorry about that."

He tried to take his hands off her but Tiffania held them.

"Wait! This is wrong! Tiffa! Tiffa?"

He noticed that Tiffania was crying.

"I am afraid... to lose my mind. And to die too. To sit here and do nothing... Why? Saito, why?"

Her crying was the last drop that broke the dam. Looking at Tiffania, Saito was overwhelmed with a feeling that they absolutely must escape.

Saito pushed Tiffania away. She was staring at him stunned.

"Saito?"

"Ouch! Damn!" Saito crouched holding his belly.

"What happened? Saito! Are you ok?"

"It's bad... stomachache... must be that dish we ate earlier... elvish food doesn't fit me..." said Saito sweating.

Tiffania yelled "Someone! Help Saito!"

The guard on the other side of the door asked "What happened?"

"He is in pain and..."

The guard told them to wait a moment and started to fiddle with some device near the door. Saito was thrilled.

*Is he opening the door? Good... I will take his weapon and take him as a hostage. And... then we escape... What happens then we will think through later.*

But the door didn't open. The guard laughed behind it.

"Hey, barbarian, don't be stupid. Your condition is being monitored with water magic. They don't want you to die. And, by the way, I don't have any weapon. We know about your abilities."

Saito quietly cursed and stood up.

"Saito?" said Tiffania, who had apparently taken seriously Saito's feigned illness. The guard continued.

"You should be grateful. We could use the potion immediately. You have six more days. It's not much but you shouldn't waste them."

"Well, thank you so very much, kind sir." replied Saito sarcastically. Then he lay on the bed.

"I though about it and decided. We can't do anything."

"What did you decide?" asked a worried Tiffania.

Saito declared "I give up!"

"Oh?"

"Loss of heart is reversible. Tabitha's mother recovered. Tiffa and me dying for the future of Halkeginia... it would be an epic story. But I don't like it at all. I have too much to lose. I am not joking."

"But..."

Saito stared at the ceiling and said frankly, "I am going to believe... In everyone. They will help us."

He had nothing to support his words, but for some reason they calmed down Tiffania for the first time in a long while.

"Never say you have nowhere to turn. You have them. And they all love Tiffa very much."

"You are right."

Tiffania wiped her tears and clung to Saito.

"Wow!"

"You know, Saito?"

"What?"

"I love you. Thank you."

Tiffania suddenly kissed his cheek. Saito panicked.

"Whaaat?"

Tiffania noticed his reaction, realized what she just said and blushed.

"No, not like that! I always blurt out whatever I think. Not in this sense..."

Tiffania groaned.

"If you say what you think then... you do love me... For me there is only Louise."

Tiffania's long ears drooped. She seemed to be worried.

"Ah, well, damn hesitation. We are where we are, we have what we have. It's good that we are together."

Serious Tiffania was nodding to Saito's words. She was still clinging to him, so the miraculous objects with softness of marshmallow and size of a melon were pressed to him.

This closeness of Tiffania gave Saito confidence.

It's strange.

No matter how desperate the situation is, a beautiful girl by his side can make everything better.

*We gave up. What else could we do? Nothing.* thought Saito lying next to Tiffania.

# Chapter 9 - Confrontation with Ali

Morning, six days later...

They were awakened by the sound of the opening door. Three elf warriors entered and suggested "Get up. It's time."

Saito and Tiffania got up from the beds and looked at each other. Saito looked at the elves, but none of them had any weapon.

Saito jumped at one of the warriors. He knew it was pointless and had given up already, but he had no intention to be obedient.

They reacted immediately and tried to hold him down. Magic fists flew into Saito's abdomen, making him faint from pain.

Saito was tied by air ropes and lay on the floor.

"Saito!"

Tiffania ran to him but was also stopped immediately by an Ancient Magic rope.

A cup with strong citrus smell was put to his mouth. Apparently he was supposed to just drink it... they didn't bother to mix it into the food... they probably just wanted to be certain...

He desperately tried to keep his mouth shut but had to open it when they covered his nose. Tiffania felt ashamed to be an elf.

The warriors turned to Tiffania.

One of them said to her.

"You are the disgrace of the elves."

"You are the disgrace of all living creatures."

The man's face become crimson. He poured the liquid into Tiffania's mouth. She almost choked but swallowed it involuntarily.

Saito tried to throw up but the moment liquid was in his mouth he was hit into abdomen and swallowed.

He lay on the floor and waited for the potion to work...

In about a minute he didn't feel any changes. A surprised Tiffania looked at him.

"What? It didn't work yet?"

One of the warriors cried in surprise when a magic lantern giving light to the room went out. At the same time something flew over Saito and two elves fell on the floor.

Saito was stunned... then he heard young woman's voice.

"...please be quiet. I will release you."

It was Luctiana's voice.

Saito heard a short spell and felt that he could move again.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Saito.

Luctiana replied from the darkness "Because this is right. Quickly, put on their clothes."

Saito took a robe off one of the elves lying on the floor and put it on. Tiffania didn't know what was going on. He took off another robe and told her to wear it.

"Ok. Thank you."

Then Luctiana returned them the sword and the wand.

"Why are you helping us?"

"You said you came from the other world."

"Yes."

"I am very interested in it. And I don't like the way Council handled it."

"I owe you big time. Thank you."

"You have to promise me something."

"Ask whatever you want. We don't have many options."

"I am helping you out of academic curiosity. You must promise to not participate in revival of the devil. Swear to your god to stay with me and to never run away."

She said it very seriously. Saito though about it a bit, then nodded.

"Ok. I promise."

"I returned you the weapon but you can never kill an elf. You have to promise me."

"I promise."

"Then we should hurry."

Tiffania and Saito raised the hoods of the robes and followed Luctiana. Outside was a corridor with plastered walls that looked like concrete. There were plenty of doors similar to one they came from.

"Here."

Luctiana went forward walking with dignity.

They turned at the corner and saw five elves in official looking clothes. Few guards accompanied them. Tiffania and Saito tensed but Luctiana stopped and said to them in a low voice.

"Grandfathers of the Council. Don't talk. Lower heads when I do."

Luctiana stood by the wall, Saito and Tiffania followed her lead. The leading old elf asked.

"Is it done?"

"Yes."

Luctiana bowed with dignity. Saito and Tiffania did the same.

"I see."

And they went away toward the room where the prisoners were held. Luctiana waited for them to pass and told the two people.

"Run."

Luctiana bolted, Saito and Tiffania followed. There was a magic elevator at the end of the corridor. When everyone was there, Luctiana said "first floor".

A disc Saito was standing on started to raise. Somehow the feeling was completely different from one in an Earth elevator.

The elevator suddenly reached the first floor. It was a vast area, like the lobby of a large hotel. They came off the disk and few elf warriors got on it. Then a low siren resounded through the lobby.

"They know." said Luctiana.

Here and there elves were asking "What is it? What happened?"

Most of them didn't seem to be informed about the situation. Reaction was slow. A few warriors ran somewhere, but most just stood there looking confused.

Luctiana went directly to the exit among the elves moving around. When they reached a large stone door, someone behind them yelled.

"Close the front door!"

Two or three soldiers were running to the door.

"What? What is going on?"

A clerk at front door reception lifted his glasses.

"Close the door! Council's order!"

"May I see this order?"

"Stop wasting time! Hurry!"

Meanwhile people were coming in and out of the building. Luctiana and the prisoners joined the flow and went outside.

Saito gasped looking at the magnificent view. The council building was a huge cylindrical structure. Stone steps surrounded it and led to a beautiful park full of flowers. Elves were walking in the park. About a hundred mails from the stone steps was a city border. Rows of stores and houses, streets and canals were surrounding the central tower like a baumkuchen.

"Amazing..."

The city looked impressive from the sky, but from this point its beauty was breathtaking.

There was nothing like that even on Earth. The buildings were different from those in Halkeginia and on Earth. They had white walls, light blue window frames and orange roofs. The buildings were different but there was some reasonable uniformity that made the city an eye candy. Saito was impressed by the commitment to keep the buildings about tree stories high.

Plenty of boats were coming and going in the canals. Imitating natural objects like birds, fish or lightning made it look like a theme park.

"We must go! Fast!"

Rushed by Luctiana, Saito and Tiffania started to walk.

"Don't attract attention. Don't run. However, don't waste time" said Luctiana tensely.

Streets came in eight directions from the center, and Luctiana entered one of them.

The street had sidewalks and roadways. In the roadways dragons pulled cars along the street.

Glass-walled stores distracted Saito. It was a strange fusion of a modern world and Earth's Middle Ages.

"The city of the elves..."

Nobody paid any attention to Saito and Tiffania in elvish robes with their heads fully covered by hoods.

"Where are you taking us?"

"My old friend's place."

Luctiana went to stairs which lead to a canal on one side of the street. There was a strong smell of the seashore.

"It's slippery, be careful."

Seaweed grew along the way to the canal so Tiffania grasped Saito's hand. She slipped a few times, but Saito didn't let her fall. Her impressive breasts brushed his hand occasionally but he had no problem with that.

Unlike the vivid activity on the street, it was quiet here.

Luctiana restlessly looked around.

"What happened?"

"There was a small boat here that I prepared."

"It disappeared?"

"Yes. Probably stolen."

From about fifteen mails across the canal someone said "the boat was confiscated."

"Ali!" Luctiana exclaimed.

"What did you do? What is wrong with you, woman?"

Ali's handsome face was distorted. Luctiana spread her hands and replied.

"I made a promise. I will take care of them."

"It was the Council decision, you can't just change it!"

"I know. But I disagree with this decision" Luctiana declared with dignity.

"Please return the boat."

It was a familiar attitude, "I know better". Louise had acted like that in the past. Ali's impatience grew.

"Well, Luctiana. Do you know what you are doing? You are betraying your race. Give them up quietly and I will leave you out of it. Now only a few people know about this matter."

"Unacceptable."

"Why are you doing this?"

Saito sympathized with Ali even though he was an enemy. To be abused like that by a selfish Luctiana... She was exactly like Louise.

"In that case they will be taken by force."

"Then our engagement will be canceled. A man who takes away a valuable research subject of his lover is not a lover."

Ali was stunned but didn't give up.

"I am a knight with a title, personal matters and duties can't be mixed."

"Wonderful. Are your duties more important than me?"

"There is no point to argue about it."

Ali pulled his sword from the waist. It shone like a mirror in morning light.

"Barbarian, your turn."

"Hey! Wait a minute!"

"As we agreed, you can't kill. Despite appearances, I somewhat like my fiance."

Anyway, it seemed that they couldn't escape without dealing with this guy somehow. Saito pulled out the sword and it glinted ominously in sunlight.

When Ali started to cast a spell, he jumped over the canal. Then he quickly lowered his sword. Without crossing the swords he jumped back and dodged.

"Hey, wouldn't it be a problem if you killed me?"

Ali replied coldly.

"It would. The force would survive and the devil still could be reincarnated."

Saito held the sword. He remembered his previous fight with an elf, Bidashal. The reflection spell was a problem. If Ali used it, without Louise here, Saito would have no chance.

*I have to use the katana before it happens.*

Before his opponent could cast another spell Saito interrupted him. He reached Ali in one leap and hit him.

Ali was a good swordsman, but the elf warrior was overwhelmed by the speed of Gandálfr. Forced into defense, he suddenly lost his sword. With a clank the sword fell behind him. Saito shoved his katana toward Ali.

"Game over. Will you return the boat?"

Ali grinned. Luctiana noticed it and yelled.

"Be careful!"

"Ga!"

Saito groaned. The curved sword ran deep into his right shoulder... then it flew to the hand of Ali.

"Barbarian, hand to hand combat is your strong point. It seems you'd better meet 'their' will."

Then four, five song swords raised up behind Ali and danced around him like butterflies.

"Spirits, may your hunt be easy."

The song swords flew toward Saito.

If Saito held the katana in his left hand he could brush them off, but they flew to his blind spot.

Saito's swordplay was incredibly fast, but it still wasn't fast enough. Far from being able to attack Ali, he was locked in defense.

"Damn!"

If the swords attacked from one direction, like an arrow, it wouldn't be a big problem. But these swords, as if having a will of their own, used a wide range of attacks. It was almost like fighting five experienced warriors. On top of that, they had no bodies.

In other words, the opponent seemed to be invincible.

Looking at the struggling Saito, a worried Luctiana said "Oh... It looks like Ali's 'spirit swords' are too much for him."

"Don't make carefree observations, help Saito!"

Luctiana shook her head.

"I can't. Power of spirits in this area is controlled by Ali now. He is good at this. There is no way I could intervene."

Saito was desperately fighting using one hand. Tiffania started to cry. Was there something she could do?

Hmm... The magic she could use was 'forget'. It's a close range spell. But... could she approach?

It was difficult to jump into the middle of this sword fight, Tiffania hesitated.

"Oh, this is bad" said worried Luctiana.

"Huh?"

"It looks like Ali is using 'sleep' spell."

Ali was casting a spell. After a small finishing gesture he pointed his hand at Saito, and Saito's eyes become muddled.

Tiffania remembered the strong drowsiness she felt during their kidnapping and trembled. Saito's position was desperate already and Ali continued to chant, reinforcing the spell.

At this rate, Saito would fall asleep.

Tiffania gathered all her courage and ran forward. She took out her wand and prepared to cast the Void spell.

"Stop."

She heard a voice.

"Huh?"

Tiffania looked around restlessly. But there seemed to be nobody who could have said this.

She heard the voice again. It sounded directly in her mind.

"'Sleep' is a spirit spell and 'forget' can't cancel it. I know it. If you do it, the song swords will impale you."

"What? What? What?"

The voice continued.

"We need to keep him awake somehow."

"How?"

Tiffania asked desperately. It wasn't a good time to investigate the source of the voice.

"Hmm. Is he sleeping already? It doesn't seem to be going well for him."

"Quick! Tell me how I can help him!"

"Ah, got it! Bingo!"

The voice gave Tiffania short instruction.

"Huh? Really? This?"

"Well, I think it should work."

Saito continued the fight, desperately trying to suppress the drowsiness. If he relaxed even a little bit, he would lose consciousness. Naturally it slowed him down.

Finally he couldn't block one of the swords and felt sharp pain in the right leg.

"Damn!"

The pain didn't drive away the drowsiness though. In fact... the pain seemed to increase it. Too bad...

"Sa, Sa, Saito!"

He heard Tiffania's voice. What is it, is she in trouble? He looked at her...

"...what?"

He suddenly saw two fruits... huge, shining, white and magnificent.

Wow, Tiffania rolled up her robe and underwear and revealed her huge breasts to the bright sunlight.

Moreover, trembling from embarrassment, Tiffania turned her face to the side and bit her lip. Saito involuntarily commented.

"Perfect."

His drowsiness disappeared completely.

"Sightseeing!"

Said Ali and the song swords attacked simultaneously from five directions. But Saito's will to live was boosted by this single glance. And he didn't want to lose heart either. Forgetting this image would be a blasphemy to life itself.

Anyway, the rune on his left hand shined. Louise probably would cry if she knew, but it did.

The katana in Saito's left hand attacked the song swords.

They were cut in halves. Saito, with a bleeding nose, muttered.

"Thank you Tiffa. It's good to be alive. Sorry Louise."

Expressing gratitude, observation and apology, Saito tried to press Ali who suddenly lost his song swords. Blood dripped from his shoulder, he was dragging his right leg. Just a little more... he thought, covered with cold sweat.

But at this moment something surfaced in the canal like a submarine.

"Huh? What?"

It was a huge dragon with silver scales, loudly exhaling. It glittering form was larger than wind or fire dragons.

Suddenly the creature spit out a thin stream of water in Saito's direction. Saito was slammed into the canal's wall.

"You can't defeat Shallar. Give up and surrender."

"Huh? That dragon! What is it?" Tiffania shouted.

Luctiana, seemingly distracted, replied "What, you don't know about

Tiffania quickly lowered her robe.

"Well, I lived in the sky mostly..."

"Right. I heard that they are not known very well among barbarians. It's because barbarians don't use the sea much. But they are popular creatures here. Are they really that large?"

"How we can fight it?"

"We are at a disadvantage here. Adult water dragon and an elf are hard to beat. They are fake, aren't they?" said Luctiana. She was preoccupied with Tiffania's breasts and looked alternately at Tiffania and herself.

"Forget about the breasts! Anyway, what should we do?"

"We can't escape without dealing with this water dragon first. I give up."

"We are not defeated yet, are we?"

"By the way, is showing breasts a barbarian's way of cheering?"

"The strangest thing happened! I heard a voice..."

"A voice?"

"Yes, it was the best partner ever..."

Partner?

Tiffania suddenly realized.

There was a certain item that Saito had called a partner...

Saito fell on the stone pavement breathing heavily. In front of him the huge water dragon was taking aim again.

The water stream hit him like a dump truck. Pain paralyzed his body.

The noise of the fight attracted the attention of elves in the street and a few of them were looking down into the canal.

"What is going on?"

Ali waved his hand to them.

"Nothing. My water dragon is acting out. He is in a bad mood."

Even if Ali won, if the commotion was big enough someone could call the guards. It would be bad; he wouldn't be able to protect Luctiana.

Still, it didn't change Saito's desperate situation.

Ali triumphantly said to Saito.

"You fought well, barbarian. But it's over. Throw away your sword."

But Saito declared decisively "No way!"

"Then I have to defeat you. Don't blame me."

The water dragon opened his mouth. The moment the water stream flew out...

Saito's body rolled to the side, moving freely. The water stream hit the stone and water fell around like rain.

What is it? What happened?

Then the sword said.

"Great, right?"

"Huh?"

"Even though we are in trouble the beautiful half-elf girl showed her unbelievable treasures."

The moment Saito heard the familiar high-pitched voice, tears filled his eyes.

The voice that he had missed. The voice that always was with him in battle. The voice that had helped him in so many predicaments...

A real comrade in arms...

"Deeeeerffliiiiingeeeeer!"

Cried Saito. The sword seemed to be embarrassed by his yell.

"I missed you too partner. I possessed this katana quickly but it took time to

complete the process. All these layers of folded iron were difficult to handle."

"Derf! Derf! You are alive! How?" yelled excited Saito. His shock was larger than Tiffania's breasts.

"I will tell you later. Anyway, we have to do something about this water dragon."

Tiny drops of splattered sea water were hanging in the air like fog. Saito gathered all the remaining energy and stood up. Derf's revival galvanized him.

"Tell me about his weak points, Derf!"

"Let's see. This animal is protected by tough scales."

The fog cleared up and the water dragon noticed Saito and tried to hit him with his tail.

Saito dodged. The thunderous strike broke the stone pavement and debris flew in the air.

The water dragon immediately swung the tail.

Saito tried to jump over it even though wound in his right leg shackled him.

"Wow!"

He floated into the air.

"This is bad. I will help as much as I can but there is a limit."

"Dodged!"

Yelled Saito, but he still had no idea what to do. The strength of Gandálfr relies on his weapons. To deal with such a monster he would need something like a tank.

Saito was locked in defense again. Now there just was no point to attack. The way it was going defeat was only a matter of time.

Saito desperately dodged the attacks of the water dragon. Water charge, tail

slam, tail swing, talons... It was like fighting a heavy tank.

"Saito! The elf is casting again!"

He heard Tiffania's warning. Indeed Ali was casting another spell.

"Damn! Derf!"

Ali seemed to finish chanting and pointed his hand at Saito. His hand was shining intensely.

It was an Ancient Magic "lightning" spell which had knocked out Louise.

Ali bet everything on this shot. He used every last drop of willpower to stun Saito with "lightning".

Saito braced himself preparing to dodge the spell somehow, but Derfflinger intervened.

"Don't dodge! Catch it with me!"

It looked like it had an idea. A discharge flowed from Ali's hand toward Saito. It reached him instantly.

The discharge hit Derfflinger like lightning hits a lightning rod. Derfflinger was electrified, the surface of the sword was emitting a bright blue shining.

"Now! Stab the dragon in the head!"

The water dragon was preparing to hit Saito with another stream of water. The moment his head approached Saito flew into the air.

"Aaaaaaaaaaa!"

Screaming he hit the dragon's head with the sword. The thick scales were impenetrable for such an attack, but the moment Derfflinger touched the dragon's head it released the charge.

An intense electric current flowed into the water dragon's body. The dragon was frozen in place... the whole body of the beast was emitting a shining light.

The water dragon fainted. It slowly collapsed into the channel.

"Saito!"

"Impossible! Barbarian!"

Tiffania and Luctiana ran to him.

Saito jumped to the stone pavement and pointed his sword toward Ali who was stunned by surprise.

"You lost. Return the boat."

Ali shook his head in disbelief.

"Impossible... How could a barbarian defeat Shallar..."

"Do it Ali. If you don't return the boat immediately, the engagement is off."

Shocked Ali blew the whistle. A boat tugged by dolphins appeared on the other side of the canal.

Two dolphins noticed Luctiana and bleated happily.

"Come on, get in!" Luctiana suggested. Saito boarded the boat, but suddenly gripped by pain, he laid down. Tiffania hurried to help him.

When Luctiana boarded the boat Ali said.

"You are really selfish. I don't know you anymore."

"Huh? What are you talking about? When this matter blows off we will get married! Love you!"

Luctiana looked askance at the stunned Ali and took the reins that led to the dolphin's snouts.

# Chapter 10 - Escape

The boat tugged by two dolphins was sprinting through the canals.

Splashing the water it easily outran other boats. Their passengers looked at it with surprise but it didn't bother Luctiana at all.

Saito was still overwhelmed by Derfflinger's revival. Even though it had revived some time ago, it didn't have enough mental power to speak until now.

Tiffania was happy to see Saito in such high spirits.

"It talks a lot."

"Indeed, because it couldn't speak for such a long time."

Well... Saito became serious. It wasn't a time to celebrate just yet. The resurrection of Derfflinger didn't change their situation much... they still were in the middle of elvish country and Luctiana wasn't entirely on their side.

"Hey, Luctiana."

"What?"

"Where are you taking us?"

"Didn't I say already? My old friend's place."

"Where is it?"

"You gonna like it," replied Luctiana with a smile.

"What will happen when you're done with your research?"

"Well, we will see."

"What do you mean?"

"That's how I am. If I think something is right I'm doing it, consequences be

damned." Luctiana laughed loudly. Saito was amazed.

"Helping us you committed high treason. If they catch you it's a death penalty, isn't it?" said Saito.

Luctiana squinted and smiled.

"Ali will fix it somehow. He really likes me."

Saito though about Ali. He did look like a worldly-wise guy.

He was a serious opponent. Still, there was something sympathetic about him.

"Well, I am not interested in location of the Gate of Shaitan. I can't help you with this. I want to tag along and continue my research."

She looked as Saito with squinted eyes.

"It would be unreasonable to expect more from an elf."

Saito nodded.

"Then we have an agreement."

Luctiana held out her hand. Saito was surprised by the gesture but shook her hand without reservations.

Then Luctiana held out her hand to Tiffania.

"Elves said a lot of hurtful things about you, but I envy you a little. Half elf, half barbarian, awesome, isn't it?"

"Really?"

Tiffania timidly held out her hand.

"Yes. I apologize for their behavior. But don't blame them, they were taught to react like that... they can't help it."

Tiffania nodded.

"But, really, those are awesome! Are they like that because of barbarians' blood?"

Luctiana squinted a little, grabbed Tiffania's breasts, and started to research them enthusiastically.

"Hey! Don't! Stop it!"

Saito imagined Tiffania's breasts he seen recently and blood again went to his head. He involuntarily held his nose. He looked at Tiffania and, no matter how he tried to look away, his eyes went right to the huge mountains covered by the robe.

Then he noticed Tiffania's bright red face and bowed to her.

"Tiffa... About what you did back there, thank you... You saved my life."

"Right... it's fine because you are a friend..." said Tiffania without any conviction. She realized that friendship had nothing to do with it.

"It was good, partner! If only you could look like that at breasts that you actually wanted to see!" said Derfflinger. Tiffania blushed even more and hung her head.

"Hey! Fool! What are you saying! It's not like I didn't want to see those all the while!"

"Mine? Really?" asked Tiffania in a choked voice. "... all the while? Did you want to see them?"

Saito's face contorted. He hated to lie. Lying was wrong. So, he confessed.

"Yes, sorry, I wanted to see! I am sorry I exist! Louise, forgive me! This is so wrong!"

"No distinction, huh? This is low." Luctiana butted in. "No! There is a distinction! Definitely!"

"Oh, Louise. If partner gets in trouble like that again, she will show them to you. I'd say it's the best medicine."

Tiffania began to tremble. Then she asked Saito with a strain in her voice.

"You wanted to see them as a friend?"

"Yes."

"Right, 'as a friend.' He just wants you," said the merciless Luctiana.

Tiffania was close to tears. This conversation had become too exciting for her. She was thoroughly confused. She said, "I might have a problem."

"Tiffa?"

"A few days ago I unintentionally said to Saito that I love him. Mister Derf told me to show my breasts to Saito. Usually I wouldn't do it. I didn't think it would wake him up. Because we are friends there wasn't supposed to be anything exciting about it."

"Nothing exciting about it, really? Damn barbarians!" Luctiana interrupted.

Almost crying, Tiffania continued her monologue.

"But Saito loves Louise. He can't fall in love with me. At least I think so. I don't have much experience in these things. But, anyway, I did it. Mother told me that I shouldn't show it to anyone other than her son-in-law. But Saito can't become her son-in-law. He loves Louise. What should I do..."

"Tiffa."

"Yes."

"Calm down. Please."

Tiffania nodded.

"I don't know, but if you guys are done with Holy War you could stay with me. I take care about my place."

"Don't joke about it, you dumb elf," said a disappointed Saito.

Tiffania fainted and fell back on her cape.

She must be very tired thought Saito, carefully laying her down for a nap.

He put an improvised pillow made from an extra blanket under her head.

Meanwhile the boat left the canals and reached the open sea. Emerald blue sea shone in the sunlight. Clouds over the horizon looked like a mass of cotton.

Under other circumstances, thought Saito, it would be a perfect vacation.

Luctiana looked at Derfflinger with interest and said.

"This is an intelligent sword, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Actually it's an imitation." Luctiana boastfully said to a surprised Saito.

"Imitation?" Saito asked.

"Yes. Making intelligent swords, or rather giving them intent is an elvish hobby, like Ali's swords that you have seen recently. This one most likely was made by elves."

"Huh? What are you saying? This is a Japanese sword... from my home country... a katana, the weapon of a samurai."

Saito remembered this from the movies.

"No, this is just a shell. I am speaking about the content. The name of this intent is Derfflinger, right?"

Derfflinger muttered.

"... right. Certainly elves made me, partner."

"Huh? Really?"

Then Saito remembered a dream he saw in Romalia when Louise gave him a sleeping pill... about events that happened six thousand years ago.

Gandálfr was an elf, Sasha.

"Now that you mentioned it, was Founder's Gandálfr an elf? Did Sasha that I had seen in my dream make you?"

Luctiana's eyes widened. She asked intently: "What? Founder's Gandálfr was an elf?"

"Well, it was just a dream that I saw..."

Luctiana was very excited.

"Well, Anubis, our saint, had a shining left hand. My uncle has this theory that he was a Gandálfr but scholars don't take it seriously. If what you said is true it supports his theory."

"Oh, right. Bidashal mentioned it. Interesting. He was very pompous about it."

"He wasn't pompous. Don't badmouth my uncle."

"But it doesn't sound right. Didn't saint Anubis defeat Founder Brimir... so that he become a saint? Why would Gandálfr defeat Founder Brimir? He was supposed to protect him."

Then Derfflinger which was silent all this time, said.

"It did happen."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Gandálfr killed Founder Brimir."

Everyone froze for a moment.

"Huh? What? Did he? Was it Sasha? Did she kill Founder Brimir? No way!"

"I wish it was a lie, but while you were discussing it I remebered the whole thing. Good grief, I wanted to forget it." Derfflinger replied earnestly.

"I went through this guy's chest."

"Hey Derf! What are you saying?"

However, Derfflinger fell silent.

Saito and Luctiana stared at each other.

"... what the hell happened six thousand years ago?"

"It was so long ago, even I don't know. But it suddenly became very interesting."

Saito was trembling.

Calamity that killed every second elf.

Founder Brimir is called devil here.

Elf Gandálfr, Sasha.

Sasha killed Founder Brimir. With Derfflinger, the sword laying in front of him...

Events that happened six thousand years ago led to the current situation. They affected every single person in this world, including the elves.

Saito felt it with his skin.

Premonition that something horrible is coming. He needed something to calm him down.

Teased by the sea breeze, he thought about Louise. His beautiful master with pink hair. His adorable sweetheart...

He couldn't imagine himself plunging a sword through her chest.

*Why the hell did you do it?*

Derfflinger, a sword with intent, was resting in the sea breeze. All these memories made it sad.

*Can something like that happen again? No way!* Even though it thought so, the sword knew that it was only a tool.

It looked at the bright blue skies.

They hadn't change in six thousand years.

They were looking at the world below everywhere.

# Zero no Tsukaima — Volume 19 — The Founder's Round Mirror

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